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THE WET FLANDERS PLAIN

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BY

HENRY WILLIAMSON

AUTHOR OF "THE PATHWAY," "TARKA THE OTTER," "SUN BROTHERS," ETC.

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

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FIRST EDITION

THE WET FLANDERS PLAIN

Apologia Pro Vita Mea

The church in the peaceful village where I live has a tower of grey stone, in which is a belfry. A clock with gilt hands and Roman numerals shines in the southern wall. It was built into the tower nine years ago, as a memorial to the men of the parish who fell in the Great War. Their names are written in the porch below, on an illuminated scroll protected by glass from the salt winds of the western seaboard country.

Sometimes, when the ringers go up into the room where hang the ropes with the coloured sallies, I go with them, climbing on up the worn stone steps of the dim spiral stairway, past the ringing chamber, to the bells. The ropes and wheels begin to creak; the bells begin to swing, and the tower trembles. Then with a dinning crash the metal tongues smite the deep bronze mouths, and an immense torrent of sound pours out of the narrow doorway.

The great sound sweeps other thought away into the air, and the earth fades; the powerful wraith of those four years of the War enters into me, and the torrent becomes the light and clangour of massed guns assaulting heaven.

I take the weight and strength of the barrage, and grow mighty with it, until it becomes but a seam of sound nicked with flashes, and puny in space and time controlled by the vaster roar of stars in their age-long travail through elemental

darkness. I see all life created by those flaming suns of the night, and out of life arises a radiance, wan and phantasmal and pure, the light of Khristos.

The wraith of the War, glimmering with this inner vision, bears me to the wide and shattered country of the Somme, to every broken wood and trench and sunken lane, among the broad, straggling belts of rusty wire smashed and twisted in the chalky loam, while the ruddy clouds of brick-dust hang over the shelled villages by day, and at night the eastern horizon roars and bubbles with light.

And everywhere in these desolate places I see the faces and figures of enslaved men, the marching columns pearl-hued with chalky dust on the sweat of their heavy drab clothes; the files of carrying parties laden and staggering in the flickering moonlight of gunfire; the 'waves' of assaulting troops lying silent and pale on the tape-lines of the jumping-off places.

Again I crouch with them while the steel glacier rushing by just overhead scrapes away every syllable, every fragment of a message bawled into my ear; while my mind begins to stare fixedly into the bitter dark of imminent death, and my limbs tremble and stiffen as in an icicle; while the gaping, smoking parapet above the rim of my helmet spurts and lashes with machine-gun bullets.

Until in the flame and the rolling smoke I see men arising and walking forward; and I go forward with them, in a glassy delirium wherein some seem to pause, with bowed heads, and sink carefully to their knees, and roll slowly over, and lie still. Others roll and roll, and scream and grip my legs in uttermost fear, and I have to struggle to break away,

while the dust and earth on my tunic changes from grey to red.

And I go on with aching feet, up and down across ground like a huge ruined honeycomb, and my wave melts away, and the second wave comes up, and also melts away, and then the third wave merges into the ruins of the first and second, and after a while the fourth blunders into the remnants of the others, and we begin to run forward to catch up with the barrage, gasping and sweating, in bunches, anyhow, every bit of the months of drill and rehearsal forgotten, for who could have imagined that the 'Big Push' was going to be this?

We come to wire that is uncut, and beyond we see grey coal-scuttle helmets bobbing about, and the vapour of over-heated machine-guns wafting away in the fountainous black smoke of howitzer shells; and the loud crackling of machine-guns changes to a screeching as of steam being blown off by a hundred engines; and soon no one is left standing.

An hour later our guns are 'back on the first objective', and the brigade, with all its hopes and beliefs, has found its grave on those northern slopes of the Somme battlefield.

A year drifts by, and I am standing on a duck-board by a flooded and foul beke in the Salient, listening in the flare-pallid rainy darkness to the cries of tens of thousands of wounded men lost in morasses of Third Ypres. To seek them is to drown with them . . . the living are still toiling on, homeless and without horizons, doing dreadful things under heaven that none want to do, through the long wet days and the longer nights, the weeks, the months, of a bare, sodden winter out of doors.

The survivors are worn out; some of them, tested beyond human dereliction, put the muzzles of their rifles in their mouths, in the darkness of the terrible nights of the Passchendaele morasses, and pull the trigger.

Those at home, sitting in arm-chairs and talking proudly of Patriotism and Heroism, will never realize the bitter contempt and scorn the soldiers have for these and other abstractions; the soldiers feel they have been betrayed by the high-sounding phrases that heralded the War, for they know that the enemy soldiers are the same men as themselves, suffering and disillusioned in exactly the same way.

And in the stupendous roar and light-blast of the final barrage that broke the Hindenburg Line I see only one thing, which grows radiant before my eyes until it fills all my world: the sight of a Saxon boy half crushed under a shattered tank, moaning 'Mutter, Mutter, Mutter,' out of ghastly grey lips. A British soldier, wounded in the leg, and sitting nearby, hears the words, and dragging himself to the dying boy, takes his cold hand and says: 'All right, son, it's all right. Mother's here with you.'

The bells cease, and the power goes from me, and I descend again to the world of the living; and if in some foolish confiding moment I try to explain why I want to re-live those old days, to tear the Truth out of the past so that all men shall see plainly, perhaps someone will say to me, 'Oh the War! A tragedy—best forgotten. No use dragging in the skeleton to the feast!' or, 'There always will be war: it's deep in human nature.' They may say as a friendly hint, 'Don't talk about the War before my boy, old chap, if you don't mind. I don't

want him unsettled: you know what youngsters are—very impressionable. And after all there is such a thing as loyalty to one's country, you know.'

Sometimes it seems even more hopeless, as when I hear a few hundred school-children, marched to the local picture palace for patriotic purposes, cheering and booing at a film which only faintly suggests reality, called 'The Somme', frantically cheering the 'British heroes' in their immaculate uniforms, and booing the 'German cowards' who always seem to be hurrying away from the heroic British (O wraiths of the 8th Division at Thiepval!). They booed even when one poor lad in grey, who went forth to fetch water for a dying comrade, was knocked over by a shell.

The children, I know, are but mirrors of the mental attitudes of their parents, of their school and religious teachers; but surely, after the bitter waste and agony of the Lost Generation, it is time that these people should begin to 'know what they do.'

* * *

I must return to my old comrades of the Great War—to the brown, the treeless, the flat and grave-set plain of Flanders—to the rolling, heat-miraged downlands of the Somme—for I am dead with them, and they live in me again. There in the beautiful desolation of rush and willow in the forsaken tracts I will renew the truths which have quickened out of their deaths: that human virtues are superior to those of national idolatry, which do not arise from the Spirit: that the sun is universal, and that men are brothers, made for laughter one

with another: that we must free the child from all things which maintain the ideals of a commercial nationalism, the ideals which inspired and generated the barrages in which ten million men, their laughter corrupted, perished.

I have a little boy now, an innocent who with his friends in the village street laughs in the sunshine; he sings and smiles when he hears the bells on the wind. Must he, too, traverse a waste place of the earth: must the blood and sweat of his generation drip in agony, until the sun darken and fall down the sky, and rise no more upon his world?

The Diary

First Day

First Day

Calais Maritime Station

The old soldier waiting in a third-class carriage at Calais for the train to take him 'up the line', sees many things by which he may recall, with a sort of quiet glamorous melancholy, those days of the War that are almost romantic, because of their comradeships, activities, immense fears, turmoils, miseries, light-thralling barrages—dwelt on in the dimness of memory, now that he is safe, free, and happy. Romantic! Yes, sometimes, late at night, the War is recalled with an indescribable feeling of immense haunting regret. The human spirit haunts its old actions in time and space, and, it may be, having sloughed an essence of itself upon the vacant air, would stray its old ways again. It vanishes in contact with the world of the living, as vapour in sunlight. 'Old soldiers never die, they only fade away.' Strange thought: one day we may discover it to be literally true.

Here, in the Calais Maritime Station, is the world of the living. The old soldier smoking a French cigarette (twenty for 4*d*.) and leaning out of the train finds amusement under this eyes. The Paris train stands opposite, filled with English people. Along the platform hurry other English people, among a swarm of porters carrying bags that have been hastily repacked

at the Customs tables. Uniformed men in hats as variegated as the caps of Allied officers during the War walk among them, examining booklets of tourist tickets, and discovering that this or that carriage belongs to their party, although for the moment the seats are occupied by other unauthorized English people. With amused calm the old soldier watches the 'scroungers' being 'turfed out', as though from the billets of another 'crush', and the fresh efforts of buffet waiters trying to sell the rightful occupants 5 francs' worth of food in dinner boxes for 24 francs.

The hats of the tourist guides are amusing, too. Fancy likens this one, with its band of white and reddish-brown squares, to the cap of a Scots Guards R. T. O.; that one (originating from Ludgate Circus) to the képi of a French colonel; the other, with its large round top striped with black and white, to the Ruritanian anti-aircraft camouflage hat in a Surrey film-studio war epic (1928 version).

The Calais train is already twenty minutes late. Yes, that is like the War, too. Dense smoke pours from the funnels of the two engines 200 yards up the platform; brown from the St. Omer—Hazebrouck—Bailleul—Armentières—Lille train; slate-grey from the Paris funnel. Along come trollies loaded with pillows for the Parisites. Pillows for the troops! Well, we had no pillows in 1914, except another fellow's boots, in those grey 'Hommes 40 Chevaux (en long) 8' trucks. But during the waits of that first dragging journey up the line we used to get hot water from the engine-driver to make tea with in our mess-tins which we had not then learned to call 'canteens'. What would he say if we asked for hot water now? The spirit strays

again to its 18-year-old wraith of 1914, and the expectant but slightly weary English tourists opposite become insubstantial. The place is full of faces gone forever. Not a morbid thought, please understand; there have been enough repetitions of that word 'morbid' from unimaginative folk to fill my lifetime. I do not want to forget the War, for the memory of it is purifying and strengthening, as in fire and water the spirit of iron is made into steel. If the old soldiers, then youths, now fathers, could but hand on their spiritual heritage to their sons! But the problem is simpler than that; a problem of afforestation where there was a jungle.

The whistle screams with the same old note, high-pitched and short. My companion, an ex-officer of Tanks with a lead-splashed neck (ordinary machine-gun bullets splashed molten on the steel plates, and sometimes spirited through the visors) and with four-toed feet (frost-bite), said 'We're off!' and we were jerked backwards beside our khaki packs on the yellow varnished seat. With five hundred francs each we were going to revisit the battlefields.

St. Omer Station

G.H.Q. in 1914. Our battalion detrained here in the autumn of 1914. A sinister and enthralling platform in that early November dusk. The relaxed, and often buttonless tunic'd soldiers in the quiet and ancient town: how we stared at them, for they were Mons heroes! What was it like, up there? Had they seen many Germans? Were they still making their mass attacks, and being shot down in tens of thousands? Their replies settled our questions, and made each one of us withdraw

into his own thoughts. They told us about the charge of the London Scottish at Messines: we were even more silent.

We marched that night to old artillery barracks, white-washed, gas-lit, bare, strewn with dusty straw. They increased the feelings I had of being taken into something dreadful and uncontrollable, from which I could never escape. The dim candle-light made me sad, for I was thinking of home, of my mother's face at the parting. Never to see her again! But the slight frenzy was stifled, and I lay down in the straw and hid my face from my stouter comrades.

The next afternoon we marched to a convent outside St. Omer, and at twilight, strolling round the grounds, and looking for chestnuts under the trees, my friend and I came on a grassy knoll where a hundred or more men were standing still and silent, looking towards the east. A flicker in the sky, a pause, another flicker, like summer lightning. No one spoke. The horizon flashes came about three or four a minute. Then a remote shiver of the air, fainter than the least breeze in the dark trees around us, and a far-away sound as of thunder. We couldn't leave that knoll. Men spoke in whispers in the deepening night. A pheasant made its grating cry among the shadows behind us, and many faces half-turned over shoulders. It must be Ypres, we whispered to each other. The cooks' fires flickered against the convent walls, and we heard a tenor voice singing, 'I'll sing thee songs of Araby.' I was glad of the darkness, for I remember the song when my mother—who was still part of my being in those days—had come to say good-bye to me on that bleak hill-camp at Crowborough. Fatal to take your mother with you to war.

But all that's over. The platform of St. Omer is soldierless, and sunlit. Again the comic engine whistle (comic to Englishmen only because it is unlike English engine whistles: no offence to the driver, who for all we know gave us hot water in the old days). We went on, through the level fields drained by willow-fringed dykes. Innumerable bully-beef tins used to lie scattered beside the permanent way; they are rust in the earth now.

Hazebrouck

At Hazebrouck station we stepped gingerly down the double steps lest our packs overbalance us, and we walked out, trying to find the Grande Place and the estaminet where, soon after meeting some of the heroes of Mons (A.S.C. branch) we had lost all our money playing a strange and fascinating game called Crown and Anchor. The owner of the board called it 'Crown and Mood-'ook'—the 'lucky old mood-'ook'. He came from Yorkshire, where they do not weigh the anchor, but pull up the mudhook. Well do I remember that Mons hero's greeting of myself and friends when we walked into the estaminet and saw him sitting at a table surrounded by a dozen 'old sweats'. 'Well, boys, all welcome if you show the colour of your brass. They all coom 'ere with the seat out of their trousers, and go away in motor-cars.' That man may have been a hero, but he was certainly a liar.

We could not find the estaminet. Which way did we march in, in 1914? There were big guns in the Grande Place in those days, painted in blotches of yellow, brown, and green, like old and new cabbage leaves. How they excited us! We all thought,

after seeing this reserve of artillery, and the length of naval guns, and the miles of commandeered London omnibuses painted grey and obviously waiting to take troops anywhere at any moment, that the War would be over by Christmas, 1914. What if it were over before we 'saw the fun'? According to popular strategists and War Correspondents, the enemy was already exhausted, having had all troops decimated in mass attacks.

(The Germans had had the same idea about their own country triumphing by Christmas in its 'righteous cause for God and Fatherland', so they told us in No-man's land on Christmas Day, when all was friendliness between common khaki and common field grey.)

Supper to the Wireless

Hazebrouck is a peaceful town. Swifts race over the Grande Place, with its sett-stones of bluish-grey, and tufts of grass growing in the earth-spaces between. We booked a pleasant room overlooking the great sunlit square, and had good food and drink in the hotel at about one-third of the cost in an equivalent place at home. During dinner we heard the familiar pleasing voice of Daventry telling us the news, and afterwards the National Anthem. We sprang to attention, with table napkins in our hands, and mouthfuls of food. The old Army spirit: we were acutely conscious, and slightly proud, of being Englishmen in a foreign country. We would show them! We did. Unfortunately verse after verse, variation after variation, followed the usual few bars. We stood for about a minute, hoping every moment it would cease, but it didn't. It went on and

on, and we stood throughout them all. Lest this be mistaken for patriotic virtue on our part, let me hasten to tell the truth that it was more properly a ghostly return of the superiority-complex.

Wars are economic in origin, the mass of each people being cohered and controlled by emotional slogans which are hostile to the truly peaceful lover of his country; the matured stupidity called patriotism is but a glossy light of selfishness, most evident among those with commercial power, hating their rivals in commercial power, and 'giving their young men to the War.'

A view-point as wide as the earth cannot be narrowed and limited to a section of the earth—it is the steel and the iron. Or would you call it being 'half-baked'? The words of a 'hot-air merchant'? Perhaps—for it is, literally, the heat of the sun and the air of the world which are the servants of evolution, that is as a Spirit making mankind. Evolution: no need to write it with an R, if you let the children be natural, and free their imaginative faculties, which psychologists are now beginning to discern (after nineteen centuries since the original revelation) at the very core of life. In other words, human life must be our ideal, before the narrow abstract virtues that civilization will shed, as the bird its leather wings.

The clock of the Hôtel de Ville across the Grand' Place tells the tranquil hour of midnight. The vast hollow of night echoes the footfalls of a man going home over the sett-stones. Four-toes, my friend of the Tank Corps, is already asleep. Swifts are screaming high in the sky, playing their mystic star-games of summer, as over the beloved English countryside. To-morrow,

Poperinghe—'Pop' of ancient joy (on returning) and apprehension (on leaving).

I cap my fountain pen. To bed! Nice clean sheets. I am free! No chance of being awakened, to put on sodden, muddy boots and clothes, and to march up the line again, into the agony and desolation of a counter-attack. I can sleep all night!

Second Day

Second Day

'Pop' Station

The troop trains arriving at 'Pop' by day used to behave peculiarly as they approached the station through the acres of hospital hutments and military cemeteries. Card parties squatting on the wooden floors of the trucks were liable to be thrown forwards, jerked upright, and flung backwards. Cling!-clang!-plonk!-plink!-crank! ran from buffer to buffer along the grey length of the train. Then another jerk, the frantic puffing of an engine whose wheels were racing on the rails, and the train went on, faster and faster, rattling through the station, and stopping half a mile past it. Then perhaps we might hear a noise filling the air as though the sky were a dome of solid glass, and an immense diamond were cutting a slow curve down it. A hard noise, as of gem-hard dust being ground away. As it drew nearer it changed to a coarse vibration of steel, opening a furrow in the very heavens, droning, buzzing, hissing, dropping in scale to a deep bass and growing louder and louder, a noise enormous and terrifying; and then a geyser of black smoke and wooden sleepers and stones arose, a rending metallic *cra-ash*, a great deep smoking crater under rails twisted and blue-scaled with heat, the whining zip of hot splinters, and the thudding down of lumps of wood and earth. A seventeen-

inch howitzer shell, fired from a dozen miles away, from behind one of those ridges the taking of which 'cost' (in the language of all-dominating property) nearly half a million casualties in 1917.

The Chemist of 'Pop'

We walked out of Poperinghe station, making our way to the rue d'Hôpital, to find Talbot House, the 'Toc H' of our little local history. It was identified by its position next to the chemist's shop, by its greyish-white painted front three stories high, and iron outer gates. We called at the chemist's shop to ask if it would be possible to see the chapel in the hop-loft, where many thousands of men had received the Blessed Sacrament before going up to the Passchendaele battles. The chemist did not remember me, of course; but I recollected that face, slightly like the photographs of Hindenburg. (He was very angry when in 1917 I remarked the likeness during the purchase of plaster for blistered feet.)

The chemist said that the owner of 'Toc H' would welcome our visit. I said 'Thank you, monsieur. Do you remember my telling you ten years ago that you were like a famous, pardon, a notorious enemy general?'

'Pardon, m'sieu? To whom do you refer, if you please?'

'To the President of the German Republic—Marshal von Hindenburg, m'sieu.'

I could see that his ideas had not changed, and hastily left the shop.

Toc H

We rang the bell of the tall grey house. Almost at once the inner door opened, and a young girl appeared. She opened the gates, and drew back with a movement quiet and charming, bidding us enter. Our nailed shoes clattered on the tiled floor. 'To see the chapel, messieurs?'

She led the way up bare white enamelled stairs, into a room austerely furnished, up another flight, and then to a door, which she held open for us before leaving with a slight movement of her head, neither bow nor nod, but a gesture of sensibility and understanding.

Up the last flight, very steep, of poplar wood unpainted and thin—worn by the thousands of nailed boots clumping up and clumping down. We sat on the bench at the far end, where the altar—an old carpenter's bench—used to stand.

Silence filled the wooden hollow of the loft, with its white-washed rafters, stained brown where rain had dripped through tiles, and its smooth bare floorboards showing the holes gouged by the goat-moth caterpillar in the living trees. Here twenty thousand men had knelt in hope and trust. Twenty thousand souls, bearing names bestowed upon them with pride and tenderness by twenty thousand mothers, clumping up the steep and narrow way, borne there by Hope, and seeking solace at the very verge of unutterable Darkness.

The sun came out of a cloud, and light shone whiter through the five semicircular windows. Sparrows could be heard chirping on the roof, and the slow rattle of wheels on the pavé of

the road below. Far away there was a dull report. Ah, the terror and dreadfulness of Third Ypres, to which some divisions returned three and four times in those four wet months. A horizon without hope: to-morrow as to-day . . . but it is over now, incredibly finished, and they are blowing up the artillery concrete 'pill-boxes' in the fields near Brandhock.

After our rest and silent communion with reality we clumped down the narrow stairs for the second, and maybe the last, time, and went on our way, bearing a fresh layer in memory, of youthful charm, grave and impersonal, waiting on two unknown English pilgrims.

'Skindles'

In June, 1916, an officer in the Rifle Brigade, enjoying eggs and chips and a bottle of wine in a certain estaminet in Popperinghe, declared to his friends that it was as good a pub as Skindles at Maidenhead. The estaminet had already a longish name painted on its front—Hôtel de la Bourse du Houblon something or other—but no one took any notice of that. The British officers began to call it Skindles, and very soon the three rooms on the ground floor were crowded with tables, and the tables with bottles; and around the bottles (for the water of the country was condemned for drinking purposes) sat the British officers smoking, laughing, eating, or wanting to eat, and shouting the name of Zoë, which was the name of the daughter of the 'Mother of the Soldiers', as madame was called. The officer of the Rifle Brigade was killed on the Somme a few weeks later, as were nearly all of his friends; but others came, and vanished, and others after them; and

many, many more stretched their booted and puttee'd legs under the tables, and drank in a fug of tobacco smoke and laughter; until the guns were silent and the feet of men marching at night were rarely heard, and upon the 'Mother of the Soldiers' and her helpers fell a strange loneliness.

And now it is the Hôtel de la Bourse du Houblon something or another again, having returned to its former easy comfort and prices. You may drink vin blanc there at 2*d*. a glass, and play billiards, or a game of violent cannons off inelastic cushions, in the second room; but you cannot get eggs and chips any more, or biftecks and French mustard. If you ask for these things in your halting French they will refer you to the Hôtel Skindles up the street, which occupies the large corner house once holding the Officers' Club. There is a booklet of photographs about it, showing the Smoking Room, A Dinning (*sic*) Room, and The Park (complete with two genuine shell-holes and some dud aerial torpedoes). And there is, according to the booklet, yet another Skindles in Ypres, opposite the station, with nearly fifty large windows along its front, blazoning its name in huge gilt letters on its brow. 'Most modern and up-to-date hotel in the salient (*sic*) Home Comforts, Reading Room Baths-Hot and Gold (*sic*) English speaking staff.'

Bairnsfather himself could not have limned so exquisite a Soldier's Dream ten years ago. Gold baths in Ypres! Colossal offspring of the demure little Hôtel de la Bourse du Houblon something or other in the rue d'Hôpital.

Such is the fortune of War; but the little anonymous subaltern of the R.B.'s, now a flower-girt headstone with the plain

inscription 'Known Unto God' somewhere in a cemetery of Picardy, is not forgotten by the 'Mother of the Soldiers.'

Our Meal in the 'What Hopes' Tavern

I have a friend who seems to get many things for nothing: books, railways tickets, fountain pens, suitcases, meals, trousers, and the usual abuse; he is a journalist. I have always envied him, for I have never been able to get things for nothing, beyond samples and the usual abuse. Consequently, after our talk with the owners of Skindles, we left to seek a meal in some less splendid, and doubtless less expensive, place. Our meagre wad of notes was to take us, we hoped, all over the Salient and down the line to Armentières; thence by train to Arras, over the Vimy Ridge and down the Hindenburg Line to St. Quentin, and then along remembered country to Achiet-le-Grand and the Ancre Valley, and around Thiepval, the Schwaben redoubt, Beaumont Hamel, and Bapaume. Then with the remainder of the money we hoped to go to Paris, spend a night there, and return to Amiens and the coast for England. Outside Skindles we counted our money; we had about £7 between us. It was not very much. Still, man must eat and drink. We sought a cheap estaminet.

In the rue d'Hôpital we found what looked like a cheap place. We entered, and out of a dark kitchen came, in due course, a young and comely woman with a reserved and pleasant smile on her countenance. We asked for an omelette. Toute de suite! Chairs were piled on the long table inside, on which lay a soiled and worn American cloth.

We waited half an hour. The room was dreary and lifeless.

Should we walk out? It looked perhaps too cheap a place. But no; we might disappoint the young woman with the Mona Lisa smile.

We waited. A smell of burning stole into the room. Still, it might be only the egg-shells. Then came the young woman, with the same fixed and pleasant expression, bearing a yellow and black omelette. She put it before us, with slices of bread. We asked for butter. Butter? Yes, butter. Toute de suite. We scraped off the unburnt part of the omelette, washing it down with a bottle of ordinary cheap white wine. Ah well, it didn't pay always to be too economical.

Two Belgian shops assistants entered, and were served with soup and roast chicken. We eyed that chicken, thinking philosophically that beggars have to be choosers. That lunch would cost them ten francs each, at least!

The butter arrived, about two pounds of it, at the end of the meal. Then Four-toes, wishing to overcome his inferiority-complex about the language, boldly asked for 'l'addition'. He was beckoned outside, semi-mysteriously, by the Mona Lisa wench. He went through the door into the café. When I joined him a moment later, he was counting the change from a 100-franc note. Forty-francs left out of it! Seeing his expression of doubt, the patron leaned over his money box, while Mona Lisa stood by his side. 'I can't quite make out what the old blighter's saying,' muttered Four-toes. 'The change seems wrong, somehow.' 'Monsieur,' said the patron, 'inside, eating my best chicken, are two Government officials. There is a large tax on strangers having meals in Belgium just now. C'est la guerre, m'sieu. So, monsieur, to save you the expense of the tax, I

call you out here and you pay me secretly. Messieurs, don't forget the waitress.'

Mona Lisa held out her hand. Feebly I gave her five francs, while the consumed part of the omelette turned to hard lumps, like shrapnel bullets, inside me. Sixty francs for luncheon! And the combined bill at the Hazebrouck hotel for supper, bed, and breakfast, was less than that.

Outside, we looked at the name of the place. A l'Espérance! 'What hopes,' as we used to say.

We laughed, and for some kilomètres along the road to Ypres, were withering the patron, or his detachable wraith accompanying us, with ironical speeches. Sixty francs! 'It was just the same during the War,' said Four-toes cynically. 'They always got what they could out of the troops. Money is first, everywhere, every time.'

We walked on, over the well worn pavé towards Ypres—and looked forward to arriving there for the first time in our lives.

The Vlamertinghe Road

Hundreds of thousands of men must remember the road from Poperinghe to Ypres. Its straitness begins between two long lines of houses, with tram-rails laid in the right side of the road. Where the houses end the pavé ends also, and straight-boled elm trees grow at the grassy edges, above the ditches on either side. The road lies on a raised causeway, above meadows and fields of flax, corn, and hops stretching away on either side. Past the station the archery target, with its

thatched pavilion, still stands on the left of the road, a tall green stalk like a grasshopper's leg and many-clawed foot.

Twenty-five minutes march out of Poperinghe we saw Kemmel Hill, blue in the right hand distance. It was captured by the enemy during his last great northern drive in April, 1918, and thereafter was invisible to our troops on the road. To-day you can see the rusty wires, which supported the wire nets strung with coloured camouflage rags, still dangling from the elms.

This narrow country road was the main traffic artery to the Salient, and a perilous way when the enemy sat up on Kemmel Hill with his telescopes, and telephones connected with his long-range batteries. It was more crowded at night than is the Strand to-day during the 'rush hour'. Marching men, guns, strings of pack mules, waggons, cars, lorries—all were congested and colliding in the darkness. Whenever a lorry engine stopped, and failed to restart after half a dozen swings of the handle, it was pushed by scores of hands and tipped over into the fields below the embankment. Shell-holes in the road itself were filled with the ruins of shattered waggons, and perhaps pieces of horse and mule, and hastily covered with earth. Then on again, thousands of tons of material, animate and inanimate, bumping, tramping, jolting forward towards the flare-glimmering Salient. To-day every tall elm by the roadside bears its traffic scars, axle-high, from the hubs of lurching lorry and waggon.

Little trees grow in the gaps between the scarred forefathers of the wayside, as thick as a man's wrist, and their roots push into the darkness of old unnamed horse-graves. The fields are

beautiful with wind-stroked corn; and in the greener fields, families of peasants on hands and knees crawl in line, picking out the weeds from among the ruffled flax. Larks sing in the sky, as they have sung during all the years and now we may share in their joyous song of freedom. Their nests are in the tussocks of meadow grass, in the slight hollows that make most of the visible ground uneven and undulating, where once shells fell, and men among them.

Vlamertinghe

We walked on, alert for signs of War. We came to a village of red-brick walls and red-tiled roofs, all new. At the beginning of the village stood an old grey cement tower, like the stump of an unbuilt lighthouse. 'Four-toes,' my companion, leaned on his stick opposite this old mill-house, and said, 'That was a casualty clearing station in 1917. I had my arm dressed there when the splinter of an anti-tank bullet had given me a Blighty one.'

He stared at the mill-house and said, 'I remember——coming up and giving the walking wounded cigarettes as we stood outside in the drizzle. He asked how the War was going. Being out of it, with visions of going home, we said, "Fine." Were we keen to get back, and finish the job? "Yes, rather, sir!" I remember reading in the papers, a few days afterwards, his eulogy on the optimism and enthusiasm of the soldiers in the Passchendaele battles.'

'Four-toes' laughed quietly.

'I should have liked him to have been with us when the old Boche was crumping the tanks going up to the jumping-

off points the night before the battle for Poelcapelle. He would have heard authentic expressions of the wounded then. Our leading tank was ditched in a shell-crater, the second was on fire. Salvos of five-nines were bursting all around. The road was a foot deep in thin watery mud, and strewn with shattered waggons and horses, drowned men, and wounded who had bled to death, covered with a hundredweight of sticking clay. We tried to go back the way we had come, down the road to St. Julien again, but the last tank of the column was bellied also. You know what it was like during Third Ypres—the ground on either side of the road, practically non-existent, was churned and rechurned like an immense squashed honeycomb with holes six feet and more deep. The mud covered the sponson of a female tank that tried to get round that way. My tank had a direct hit, but I managed to get out with one of the crew. Outside, it was like standing in the middle of the flame of a colossal Primus stove. Wounded infantry, going up to the tape-lines for the attack at dawn on the morrow, were crawling and moaning round the tanks, and fighting to get inside. One poor swine had lost boots, puttees, and trousers—all had come off in his struggle in the muck. He couldn't see, for his eyes were shot away—so was his lower jaw—got caught sideways by a traversing machine gun from a pill-box.'

'Four-toes' stopped.

'What happened!' I asked.

'Oh, the politician, who probably still prides himself on his understanding of the depths of human nature, said in his speech that everywhere he had found optimism among the troops: that their spirit was splendid; and that the most con-

vincing sign of all that the nation was sound, was the spirit of the wounded—they were keen to get back and finish the job. I suppose he had to say something, just as the Boche had to say something to their people at home.'

'We shall be seeing the New Menin Gate soon,' I said. 'On the inner walls of the Gate are chiselled the names of about 60,000 men lost in the Salient, most of them wounded and drowned in the mud of the Passchendaele battles. There were the usual words when it was unveiled. I don't blame anyone, for most people don't know what words mean. You know what most people are—suspicious and timid and competitive: those vices are the war-makers.'

'Four-toes' sighed. He was standing on the outer edges of his shoes, to ease his maimed feet 'Sometimes,' he said, 'I think our generation went west in vain. The Russians, after all the hopes of its visionaries, seem just the same people that one finds everywhere. Anyhow, it's jolly nice to be here now; I'm quite happy, but I do hope my blasted feet won't konk out.'

Vlamertinghe Church

One small bit of Vlamertinghe remains as it was. By the first bend of the road inside the village just before the church, stands an iron Calvary out of a grassy mound. The figure of Jesus rusts in the sunlight, the left foot broken off, the right ankle fractured. A few yards away stands the village War memorial, a monolith of the figures of a soldier and a nurse cast in concrete. It has a human appeal, although it does not show reality. The memorial is already falling apart, owing to faulty erection, and is held together by galvanized iron wire.

In the churchyard tall iron crosses, factory-made, have been put up on the graves of the ancient dead, some of them more than a century old. Inside the church one sees the same lifeless spirit of materialism. The walls are decorated with stencilled patterns, hundreds repeated in each long line, the hammers and pincers, the crown of thorns and nails. The wall sculptures of Biblical scenes, cast out of a mould, are without inspiration, and gaudily coloured. None of the new church windows are made to open; the air remains stale from week to week, like well-worn words that have lost the original vitality of their purpose and meaning. There is a faint smell of incense in the tomb-like place.

Outside, the rusty figure of Jesus on the mound, in wind and rain, in sunlight and starlight, with new wounds given in this twentieth century of enlightenment, stands for all to see. Heaven knows what idolatry has come out of that cruel death; and there is no truth in an idol.

In Vlamertinghe a sad sight—a little chaffinch in a small wooden cage, set with a few bars in a space about two inches square. It was hopping up, hopping down, hopping up, hopping down, as quickly as you read it. Some enthusiast had blinded its eyes with a needle, to make it sing better.

We walked on, out of Vlamertinghe.

The Vlamertinghe—Wipers Road

The road leading out of Vlamertinghe towards Ypres makes a long but slight **S** bend. It is in full view of the Wytschaete ridge, which lies forward on the right. Old rusty camouflage-support wires are still to be seen dangling on the elms at the

bend. Very shortly there are no trees left, all having been topped, splintered, flaked, and finally thrown, by gunfire. 'Whitesheet' ridge is six miles distant as the airplane flies; but officer-eyesight, aided by powerful telescopes, directed through ground-level slits in certain concrete 'pill-boxes', could see the dust raised by wheels and feet. Guttural words into the telephone: a few seconds, and the dull thuds of guns behind the ridge: a few more seconds, and the bursts of shells observed on the distant road. No wonder it was necessary to take the Wytschaete and Messines ridges before the great attacks of 1917 could be prepared.

There used to stand an upturned gas-cylinder by the railway level-crossing between Vlamertinghe and Ypres. There was also a policeman there, night and day. 'Box respirators at the alert!' You felt you were done for after passing that place. 'I shan't come back this time,' one or another of the boys used to say. 'Garn, don't get the——wind-up, chum,' said others. 'Ah, I shall be pushing up daisies soon.' 'What do you think Wipers is, a——park with flower gardins? There ain't no—— daisies left to push up.'

How it all comes back. I could write scores of pages about each one of a hundred faces that used to look to me as a sort of—God knows what they thought about me. I saw the melancholy one, the would-be daisy-pusher, in Hampstead this summer, carrying cardboard hat-boxes. He said he often thought of the old days, and talked them over with his wife. He was happily married, and confided to me, over a glass of rum, that he thought women were much better than men. 'They know too much about pain to give it to others,' he said. 'I reckon they

ought to be in Parliament, then they won't waste money on bombs,' he said, earnestly.

'Goldfish' Chateau

Just before the level-crossing, a hundred yards to the left of the road, stands 'Goldfish' chateau. Why was it never knocked down by shell-fire? It was a divisional-headquarters throughout the War; and advanced G.H.Q. during First Ypres. It was said by German prisoners that General von Bissing, who lived in the place for three days during the German sweep forward in 1914, liked it so much that he decided to take it after the War as part of his 'blood money'. Anyhow, it was hardly touched, even by shrapnel, although some of the goldfish in the horseshoe-shaped pond around it were occasionally seen floating on their sides.

Peace came. The Vlamertinghe road was remetalled; the village was cleared of its grass-grown brick-heaps, and old foundation sites were marked out anew; the shell-holed fields were levelled by the shovels of Flemish, Polish, and Italian cheap labour. A vast pile of dud shells and shell cases arose near 'Goldfish' chateau. At night the dump was stealthily visited by men with sacks, and chisels and hammers with which to knock off copper driving-bands and aluminum nose-caps—the latter much in demand by American visitors as souvenirs. Chip, clang, clack, went the hammers of the stealthy. They knew it was dangerous, that many had already gone up in the great cause of the American souvenir trade; but no matter, two francs a nose-cap was being paid. CRUMP!

ROAAAR!! The thousand-ton pile exploded, the scroungers disappeared, and so did 'Goldfish' chateau—two years after the War was 'fini'.

'The Admiral'

One of the minor figures of the War around 'Goldfish' chateau has already become one of the legends of the Salient. He was an owner-driver in charge of a volunteer convoy ambulance in the early days; but later he left the convoy, and became an unofficial inventor of harassing machines, bombs, and other gadgets for making the enemy in the trenches uneasy. He was neither soldier nor sailor, but he wore both the badges of rank of a captain in the Army and the crenellated rings of a lieutenant of the R.N.V.R. He was known as 'The Admiral'. Among other things, he invented a body-shield which he claimed to be bullet-proof; and to prove it, he walked in daylight past Crossroads Farm and Forward Cottage, up the road subsequently called Admiral's Road. The shield was hand-propelled, and gave no cover to the flanks; and Ypres was a salient. Long after he had come out of hospital, cured of the wound in the side of his neck, his shield was to be seen rusting on the grassy road in No-man's land.

The Admiral's end, like his official status, was mysterious. He set a booby trap for the enemy opposite Mortaldje, and fell into it himself. His body was found (according to rumour) half a mile away, near the Canadian gun-pits left in No-man's-land after the first gas attack. Half a mile! It seems a long way to be wafted. Anyhow, the Admiral and his fearful toys were never seen again. Some said he was a spy, and had

gone through the German lines again when he had got all the information he required; and that 'Goldfish' chateau, so useful as an information bureau, remained as such.

Ypres

We reached Ypres in the late afternoon, with blistered feet. 'Four-toes' especially suffered.

Ypres is unrecognizable: Wipers exists in the memory only. The city to-day is clean and new and hybrid-English. Its vast Grand' Place holds enough air and sunlight to give a feeling of freedom and space. The rectangular ruined fragment of the Cloth Hall is contained in its scaffold box. Grasses and wild-flowers on the tops of the walls make the ruin beautiful. In spring the jackdaws feed their young in the nests within the masonry gaps on high. The less unobservant American visitors notice the four-way trumpets of the siren on the top of the ruin, and ask their guides if it is 'the old original gas-horns of the British'.

Alas, there is no historical thrill about that siren. It is a modern instrument fixed there by the local Fire Brigade.

During the daytime the Grand' Place is the parking place for motor-cars and charabancs. A handbill may be put into your hand by a Belgian, an amusing document with its quaint spelling. 'First Class cars for hire. Competition impossible.' Well, there used to be nothing like downright statements for impressing the ignorant: but to-day . . .

'Carefull (*sic*) drivers. Highly recommended and very popular with visitors tours to Belgium, the prices quoted as for first class car, including an experienced guide explaining all

places of interest, visited or passed, and are inclusive, absolutely nothing extra.'

You may go to Schrapnell (*sic*) corner, or Tyne cote (*sic*) cemetery ('absolutely largest in the district, about 12,000 graves'), or the 'Highly recommended and most interesting point of view Trip No. 7', which includes 'St. Julien, Poelcapelle, and the famous Houthulst forrest (*sic*), Deat (*sic*) trench kept up in the state as it was during the war and can be visited for the small entrance fee of one franc.'

Death Trench, kept up in the same state as during the war, for three half-pence!

Then there is Trip No. 9 . . . 'after lunch a most extensive visit to Bruges (often referred to as the Venice of the North) including amongst others the Bloodchappel with the casket containing a drop of the Blood of Christ, brought back from Palestine by one of the Crusaders, with its famous paintings, recommended to all desiring a real pleasant and interesting day . . . £2 10*s*.'

'Four-toes' rests on a seat in front of an hotel, and sips his pale-yellow beer, as I tell him of a woman I know, a parson's wife in a village in England, who went specially to see the Bloodchappel. The same woman solemnly declared to me, on an occasion when my remarks had affronted her ideals, that her best friend had 'lost her husband in the War because she had loved him more than she had loved God', *i.e.*, she had not gone to church on Sunday, but stayed at home or gone for walks with her husband.

We drink our beer, and stretch our legs, for the pavé has been hard going; and we find a parallel to that mental

attitude in the annals of the highly-important, to wit, the *War Memories* of General Ludendorff, where he writes of the battle of Tannenberg.

'The enemy losses in killed and wounded, too, were extremely heavy. One of the most brilliant battles in the history of the world had been fought. To the training of our army in peace time, alone, did we owe this feat.' (Then four paragraphs further on he says) 'In the Protestant Church at Allenstein General Von Hindenburg and I rendered thanks to Almighty God for this victory.'

Both sincere patriots, this important General and the unimportant wife of a parson; both with minds of dead tissue (whited sepulchres, to use Another's metaphor).

Multiply this type of mind one hundred million times, with its every thought and action on the same level, and you get your civilization breaking out into wars between nations, each declaring its belief in its national righteousness under heaven.

Sitting here in the sunlight, before the square where doves are fluttering and cooing, I know that we must not expect the world to change for us, for our thought is the world.

Evening on the Ramparts

After sunset I walked on the ramparts of Ypres, whose brickwork, upholding a deep bank of earth, is cracked and fallen in places, so that it is wise to go carefully. Once there were hundreds of dug-outs in these ramparts, lit by electric light from a power station near the Menin Gate. The building of the power station is almost as it was before the War, almost the only place remaining of Old Ypres.

At night rats used to squeal whenever a light was flashed on them, because they had learned that a light usually meant a revolver shot. The beasts used to eat everything; they would climb down the string of a swung sandbag, and eat the reserve candles it contained.

I walked on the ramparts with another man—the wraith of my old (or my very young) self. That wraith fluttered with fear and disquiet and homesickness; it thought of the sorrows of a mother's face. Both faces may have hidden these human feelings at parting, owing to an unnatural convention, but the eyes must have betrayed.

Below the scarred brick ramparts lay the still water of the moat, with its deep bed of iron and lead. Fish were rising, swallows and swifts taking their last evening sips as they flew. The new Menin Gate rose white and great between two sections of neatly repaired brickwork. Children were running out of the 'Shannon' cinema built on the bank across the water. Motor-cars coming down the Menin Road, carrying people to a jolly Saturday night in the Ypres cafés with their friends, bumped and swung over the uneven pavé surface, their sirens filling the lighted white hollow under the new Gate.

I saw these things, and the wraith with me wondered; for I heard in my mind, farther away than my mind, the marching of the feet of men in sweat and fear, the clatter of wheels, and the hoofs of animals not knowing why they were there in the roar and flash and appalling terror of bursting shells. Everything is fear and ruin, and ringed in a semicircle—a salient—of pale white wavering lights. They are passing up the Menin Road, and over the quaking track of beech-slabs; and I long

to turn away from the darkness and the outer darkness of its being, and to be home again, and to seek cherishing there.

Long grasses and wild trees grow on the ramparts. When you walk there at twilight, wary of the broken tops of the sally-ports, you see the new houses, all without a chip or a tile missing; but they do not obscure the passing of the men. No, it is not men; it is a force that is passing, an invisible wind that hurls down the stones and the bricks soundlessly, that fills the Grand' Place and all the streets with cries and shouts and the last screams of the dying, and yet all is without sound.

I left the ramparts, and sought the café where my foot-weary companion was awaiting me. There was much noise in there, and the lights were bright. Men were playing billiards; others talked with animation at the tables; waiters hurried with trays of filled glasses. I heard the click of billiard balls, the happy Saturday night chatter of men who know they need not work on the morrow. Smoke straying from pipes and cigarettes, laughter, 'Good health!' from my friend to me. I looked up, took a pull at the pale-yellow beer, and nodded to him; but the café scene fades, and I am a wraith again in the darkness rushing by, yet stagnant amid the soundless cries, the viewless white flashes of field guns lighting the broken wall and the scattered rubble; the misery of men marching, laden and sweating, through the ruin of the Menin Gate. Passing strings of men slouching away from the line, thinking only of sleep, sleep, sleep; slouching on, anywhere, anyhow, puttees over boots, feet swelled and unfelt, stumbling, but slouching on again. Nearer and nearer the

haunting flares, rifle slings cutting into shoulders, thighs and ribs and arms overhot with sweat, the bruised feet hastening to get away from Hellfire Corner! Christ! Jerry's five-nines were crumping, and sending the timber track into the air! The orficer will not let them be killed!

Alas, prayers do not deflect the hissing flight of bullets that rip, or dissolve the shell that scatters trunk and limbs into charred fragments, among the upheaved tree-stumps of Polygon Wood.

I get up and go back to the ramparts. The evening star is a rayless bright point of silver in the western sky. The edges of the moat are dimly whitened with cement rocks tipped from the bank. There are tins, too, and rusty lengths of angle-iron. Nettles grow out of the concrete machine-gun shelters on the further bank. Below, in a boat pushed into the reeds, an old man is fishing. Everything is normal for him; he is using bread pills to catch the roach which roam in shoals from the Menin to the Lille Gates.

The border of ground under the ramparts is sown with dwarf beans and potatoes. It is his allotment; he has finished weeding for the evening, and is enjoying a pipe and the watching of his float. He sees only reed, water, lilies, his quill float, and the peaceful summer sky above the green field; he hears only the sirens of motor-cars, and the loud confident song-chatter of the reed-warblers in the reeds.

'Soldat? Anglais? Retourné?'

'Oui, m'sieu.'

'Sale Boche fini, heh?'

His mind was formed before the War; he has not been

caught in the sweat and the fire, like the young men who wore khaki and field-grey and horizon-blue, some to return with light in their souls, the light that rises so frailly out of the darkness of the World; even if the ultimate answer be, in the words of that great poet, Wilfred Owen, dead in the War:

> Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth
> All death will he annul, all tears assuage?
> Or fill these void veins full again with youth
> And wash with an immortal water age?
>
> When I do ask white Age, he saith not so,—
> 'My head hangs weighed with snow.'
> And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith,
> 'My fiery heart sinks aching. It is death.
> Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified
> Nor my titanic tears the seas be dried.'

Third Day

Third Day

A Charabanc Ride round the Salient

The next day was Sunday. After coffee and rolls we strolled across the Grand' Place. Near the western, or main 1914-1918 entrance, by the scaffolded ruin of the Cloth Hall, a crowd of young men was gathered. Many motor-cycles stood near, among the waiting cars and charabancs. A race was in progress, the circuit being along the Menin Road to Menin, thence to Wervicq and Comines, and back to Ypres by way of Warneton, Messines, Wytschaete, St. Eloi, and the Lille Gate.

The riders started off with two-minute intervals. Some carried girls on their pillions. None of the machines had silencers, there being apparently no law about noise in Belgium. They had huge tyres, some of them with eight-inch treads.

While the first riders were banging and bumping over the sett-stones to the finishing post, having completed the circuit at an average speed of about thirty miles an hour, another group was gathering under the awning of one of the hotels. I saw khaki uniforms, red tabs, 'brass hats,' rows and rows of medal ribbons. There were also women, and a pair of episcopal gaiters. There were civilians, some wearing the ribbons of medals that were awarded for gallantry to the rank and file during the War.

This group was approached by a burly man dressed in blue jersey and blue trousers. He looked as strong as an ox. A tray of brass souvenirs was slung round his neck. He had no arms. The uniformed staff-officers politely said they did not want any souvenirs of Ypres, merci bien. The Bishop, however, was interested, and bought a flower-vase made out of a brass shell-case. He may have bought it because he was sorry for the armless man, who was in robust health and apparently in a sound economic position; but he certainly was pleased with the flower-vase, part of a British 18-pounder shellcase.

Another man approached, with a bag of newspapers. To my surprise, I was able to buy the Sunday papers of London in Ypres at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. While I was reading an article by a sporting writer a voice said over my shoulder, 'You fellows going to the unveiling of the divisional memorial?' I turned, and saw a face vaguely familiar under the red-banded cap of a staff-captain. I explained that we had not belonged to that division; that we were walking about 'on our own'.

'Come along if you'd like to,' said the friendly voice.

I thanked him, and may have murmured something about the expensive charabanc tours, for he replied, 'That will be all right. I'll ask the General. We can squeeze two more in.'

I thanked the erstwhile A.D.C. 'Four-toes,' my companion of the Tank Corps, was happy at the idea of wheels, since his feet were not too easy after the walk from Poperinghe of the previous day. He borrowed the Sunday newspaper from me. 'I've seen that face somewhere,' he said, looking at the photograph.

The A.D.C. returned. 'The General says he'd be very pleased to give you both a lift.'

He was the sporting writer.

We set off in the charabanc, travelling north along a bumpy narrow road lying through cornfields.

Behind us sat a man in the uniform of a subaltern of the Royal Engineers, with a blue and white brassard above his elbow. I noticed moth-holes in his service tunic, which had the appearance of having been recently dry-cleaned. He leant forward with his head between our shoulders resting on the springy upholstery of the seat-back, and was kind enough to tell us all about the country through which we were passing, and in a low voice about the uniformed men in the motor-coach with us.

'That must be Outskirt Farm. Good Lord!' exclaimed a concise voice in front of us, incredulously.

Our guide whispered, 'That's Lieut.-Col. So-and-So. He's a famous mathematician at Cambridge. One of the few living men who understands the Einstein theory. A damned good soldier, too.' 'Is that Frascati's?' asked another voice. 'I think it must be—No, it isn't. It can't be. Yes, it is! I don't know.'

No one seemed to know.

Our guide whispered, 'That's young Blank—one of the Blanks of Oliver, Sons, and Stature, the big London builders.'

I whispered back my thanks, with a request for information about the general.

'Oh, that's Major-General—— A dear old boy. The troops used to call him "Daddy"—— A white man. You know who the A.D.C. is, don't you?'

I nodded, and he seemed slightly disappointed; nevertheless he told me. 'And a damned good tipster he is, too!' he added.

We passed Zouave Villa, and Joffre Farm to the left and Foch Farm to the right—both with new red brick walls and red-tiled roofs. 'Nothing left,' said a man in mufti. 'Hello, here's Iron Cross Roads. No, it can't be. That must be the Pilkem Ridge in front. Then where is this?'

We passed other farms, which were identified only with the help of the map—Mackensen Farm, Gallwitz-Farm, Boche House, Villa Gretchen, Jolie Farm.

'This is the Pilkem Ridge.' We looked backwards, and down the line of 'pill-boxes' among the corn. 'By Jove, no wonder the old Hun could shoot us up. Look at the observation on our lines he had.'

They remembered awhile, silently. Apparently the division had made an attack over this country during Third Ypres. 'Ah, that's Stray Farm on the right there. Then Iron Cross Roads is in front of us. Yes, I remember now.'

We drove on for another couple of minutes, and stopped just before a culvert carrying the road over a large ditch. About two inches of water meandered in the ditch, which was strewn with roots of trees. Fifty yards from the road, at the edge of the northern bank of the beke, stood two squat, square, heavy concrete blockhouses.

'Great Scott, this must be the Steenbeke! It's a bit smaller to-day!"

We got out of the charabanc. Other cars, which had been following, pulled up behind us. The General, the G.S.O.1., the A.D.C., and other officers of the divisional staff led the

way towards a crowd of men and women, who had come from the red-brick village in front of us on the imperceptibly sloping ground. I recognized it with amazement. This must be Langemarck!

The villagers were gathered round a Belgian military band grouped in front of a draped memorial. There were many salutes, not quite so rigid and precise as ten years ago. The Bishop and his bemedalled Chaplain came up, in their black and white vestments. The Belgian General took off his 'British Warm' and revealed a score of glittering and enamelled orders.

The English General delivered an address in French. Many of the young Belgian bandsmen smiled at his accent. The older Belgian soldiers, with ribbons on their tunics, remained grave. He was white-headed, serious, and one felt that he had thought much about the things that had happened in this very place since he had retired from a soldiering life. Like many another who had known the terrible reality he might have lost his old ideas.

The Belgian General then delivered a reply in English of four closely-typed foolscap pages. No one smiled at his accent. I heard an English cemetery-gardener, wearing the Military Medal, mutter 'Beautiful, Beautiful!' several times during the long and laboured address, which seemed to me an almost meaningless mixture of stereotyped phrases which one had heard and read ten thousand times before. The phrases and words Glorious Achievement, Superb Military Feat, Incomparable Ardour of the British Soldiers, Incalculable Sacrifice, Without Parallel in the History of the War, etc., etc., fell one after another from the uneasy but dutiful tongue of the Bel-

gian General—and he was referring to the virtues which were responsible, apparently, for the capture of the ruins of the fortified village in August, 1917.

Apparently this satisfied our sense of reality, for with subdued murmurs of applause the speech ended. Then the Memorial was unveiled, and the Chaplain began the dedicatory service.

'Create in us a new heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within us.'

'And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive them that trespass against us.'

'O thou who art heroic love, keep alive in our hearts that adventurous spirit, which makes men scorn the way of safety, so that Thy will be done. For only so, O Lord, shall we be worthy of those courageous souls, who in every age have ventured all in obedience to Thy call . . .'

Did we understand what this prayer *really* meant?

We stood silent and bare-headed before the Memorial, on ground but lately a horror of manifold agonies suffered by men of several nationalities, men who had not wanted to do the things that they had done, but had wanted their homes and their families; men who had suffered agonies which were now of Glory, Sacrifice, Heroism, Patriotism—all the abstract ideas which Europe still suffered her children to be taught.

A Chat with a Cemetery Gardener

After the tension of the service we explored the fields on either side of the almost dry ditch which so many thousands of men had known by the ominous name of Steenbeke. Bul-

locks were grazing in the fields, where buttercups grew. How came the buttercups there? There were still things in the bed of the brook, whose course was marked by broken stumps of pollard willows, but we had to peer to find them. A swallow had made her nest in the roof of one of two 'pill-boxes'; it was good to hear the young birds cheeping within the mud cup. A voice by my side—it was the voice that had murmured 'Beautiful! Beautiful!' to the phrases of the Belgian General—said, as I stared at the mark of the frame-boards in the concrete of the yard-thick walls. 'Just fancy, twenty-seven men and nine machine guns were taken out of this place! It was isolated by dense white smoke of phosphorus shells, and then rushed and bombed through the machine-gun slits. I don't know how we did it.'

'Do you think you could do it all over again?' I asked.

He shook his head, and stared at the Steenbeke. Presently he asked me if I didn't think it was a grand service.

I said, not wishing to hurt his enthusiasm, that I did not quite understand exactly what all the words meant.

He readily agreed with me, adding that he was glad 'the boys were not forgotten, and that they had got a decent Memorial at last'.

Like most of the gardeners of the English cemeteries, this man was essentially gentle and quiet-living, as are most men who have much to do with flowers. Every gardener I met and talked to said the same thing: that the local folk 'didn't like them'.

'They'd have us out of it to-morrow if they could,' said the gardener who had admired the speech of the Belgian General.

Quite a number of local folk, apparently, get blown up every year; in every case the cause is the same—squatting by a 'dud' shell with hammer and chisel, and trying to remove the nosecap. 'And others still go on in the same way,' he told me. 'They don't seem to learn a lesson from the others going up. It's funny how some folk never can be taught anything, isn't it?'

We get a Free Lunch

We rode back to Ypres in the charabanc, and were about to thank our new-made friends, and depart, when the kind subaltern (dry-cleaned) of sappers suggested that we should have lunch with their party at Skindles Hotel.

'It's all paid for,' he explained. 'There'll be enough extra for two little ones.'

So we remained in our seats until the charabanc pulled up, with a dozen others, at the grand hotel. Inside the 'dining-room' were at least two hundred people, most of them being Americans with large and heavy heads and horn-spectacles. They were eating their food as though mechanically: having no interest, it appeared, in either their food or in their surroundings. Seldom have I seen so many big men eating silently (if one excepts the noises of chewing).

'Four-toes' and I enjoyed the soup and the beer and the pigeons and salad and compôte de fruit and cream and coffee.

'That makes up for yesterday's lunch,' he said, as we went out into the crowd of Americans.

I Chat with an American

Outside the hotel, beside the laid-out flower-gardens, are two howitzers and a shattered British tank. An American came up while I was trying the rusty elevating gear of one how., and asked me what it was. I told him it had fired 9-inch shells on Ypres from Houthulst Forest. 'There's a better specimen over there,' I said, pointing to the other fifty yards away. 'This one will do,' he replied. 'Now I've only got to see Hill 60, the holes at Messines, the Bloodchapel at Bruges, and the Death Trench, then I'm through.' He hurried away.

We have another Free Ride

We prepared to say good-bye when our friends reassembled by the charabanc, but our good fortune was to continue. We rode away out of Ypres, along the tree-lined road we had walked the day before, and through Poperinghe to Locre and Kemmel, thence down the hill, across the gentle valley, and up the slope which ended on the red-brick village line of Wytschaete and Messines.

On the arc of the mine-craters we stopped, and got out of the motor-coach. The holes, a hundred yards in diameter, are deep with water; willows grow at their verge, and rushes, the wide home of many frogs. Belgian youths bathe in the water of the craters on hot Sunday afternoons in summer.

Nineteen mines were blown in a semicircle around the base of the gradual sloping hill that June dawn long ago, when our men went over with oranges and bombs in their pockets. A German concrete 'pill-box' still remains broken at the edge of

one of the craters in the brown sandy soil, its reinforcing iron grids bent and rusty. The quaking of the ground in the darkness that preceded the mighty ruddy roar of the sky-blasting gases threw all men reeling to their knees. Did it ever happen? Yes, for here are the craters, filled with ruffled water gleaming with the summer sky.

Having looked and thought, and come to nothing, we walk down to the charabanc again: the General, the Bishop, the Famous Mathematician, the Famous Sporting Writer, the Rich Young Builder, the Dry-Cleaned Man and his pretty wife, and the others who are our friends for the afternoon. Seated in the charabanc once more, the guide from the Ludgate Circus office asks for our tickets. Horrible moment! He comes to me, and I begin to pull out my wad of notes, but he smiles and says, 'Press?'

'No, er, yes. Well, no,' I say, desperately trying to 'get away with it,' like my friend the ablative journalist.

'I've read your things,' he replies. 'That'll be all right.'

I learn from the whispers of the Dry-Cleaned Man that he is the unknown friend who 'fixed it' with the guide. I whisper my gratitude, marvelling at the power of print.

We arrive back at the Grand' Place at tea-time, and say good-bye to our good hosts of the Division which took Langemarck so long ago; a little sadly, but so it has always been in this land, where the faces of friends are drowned far under Time.

Fourth Day

Fourth Day

Afternoon on the Ramparts

To-day we are taking things easily, because the feet of 'Four-toes' are 'done in' rather badly, and we hope to walk down to the Somme. There are several English visitors wandering about, but the place is peaceful and quiet.

We are lying on the ancient brickwork which binds the ramparts of Ypres, warmed in the summer sun. Wild clover grows out of the mortar with the scarlet pimpernel and the long, seed-laden grasses. The wall, dropping 25 feet to the moat, is scarred and scalloped by old shell-fire from beyond the ground rising gradually to the first arc of low ridges which scarcely dominate the city—you may read of these ridges in the history books. To-day the ridges are red with the new tiles of farm-houses and villages. There is no brutal downward droning of heavy shells; only the rattle and tattoo of the motor-cycles in the Grand' Place behind the clean houses.

Here on the ramparts, among the tall, wild grasses shaking in the wind, we can lie at ease, and watch the birds among the reeds on the far bank of the moat. There is a drab bird with a dingy grey breast, slightly smaller than a thrush, standing an inch or so above the water at the edge of the green stalks, and singing with all the power of his throat-strings. Through

glasses we can see his orange throat as his beak opens to pour out the shrill, continuous chatter, which is a strange jumble of sweet and querulous tones.

The reeds quiver behind the reed-warbler, and a black bird, nearly as big as a duck, paddles into open water. Her beak and pate are a startling white. She is followed by a bird less than half her size, also paddling. 'Kroat!' calls the big bird, and two other smaller birds follow her from the reeds. The parent bird tips up and dives, and comes up a few seconds later, and dives again. The three watch where she has vanished.

One of the reeds rises slowly up, and falls aslant. It slides gently along the water, then floats showing the blenched stalk by the root, which the diver's bill has cut. The bird pecks at the stem until the white pith is free, and then she swims to her farthest little one and feeds it.

'Kroat!' The father coot paddles out of another patch of reeds, followed by two little coots. Are these the daughters of the family? Like the sons, they have reddish heads. The male coot dives, and bobs up with a dark-green waterweed in his bill, and his back covered with another weed. When he has slipped it off he feeds his nearest chick, and swims towards his mate. 'Kroat!' he says. 'Kroat!' she replies. They are happy among the water-lilies of the moat, whose leaves the wind has turned up. There are two kinds of lilies, a large open white-petalled flower with a golden centre, and a smaller lily, growing on a tall stalk, bearing a round cup of bright yellow. The flat oval leaves are surrounded by the tiny white flowers of the crow's-foot which rise out of their foliage lying thick in the water like brown and draggled feathers.

You may remember the water below the ramparts of Ypres, with its stagnant and terrible scum and those pallid things, sodden and gashed, lying below the stalks of the broken lilies. To-day it is beautiful and tranquil, shining with the white and blue of the sky. Shoals of fish, with grass-green backs and ruddy tails and fins, turn and splash in the clear water by a sunken double line of piles leading out of the sally-port below. Sometimes a carp shows its back-fin among the lily-leaves that are the shape of a painter's palettes. A swallow and his mate drift by my idle, elbowed head, throwing their wings, so easily and lightly, along the scarred brickwork towards the Lille Gate, and, wheeling on one wing-tip, come back along the loved way to their nest under a jutting block of masonry.

Jackdaws fly over, to their colony in the ruins of the Cloth Hall, where their young are perching; a wagtail is skipping from lily-leaf to lily-leaf by the family of coots, now preening their feathers on back and breast. Sometimes a strange noise comes up from the rushes under the wall, a loud noise, which is neither bleat, nor croak, nor quack, but a dissonance of these sounds. The cry is taken up and repeated and swells into a strident chorus. Once there were like noises in the throats of men staggering down from the first gas attack. Leaning over the brickwork, carefully lest it be loose, we see the bulging eyes of a bull-frog, and another, and another. They, too, have their agitations, their hopes, and their happinesses, like the birds and the water-plants about the moat of this peaceful city.

How sweet a thing it is to be alive and free in the sunlight among the fair grasses of summer, watching the swallows' wings gleaming blue above the water.

Fifth Day

Fifth Day

Our Hotel

Ypres is said to have the best hotels in Belgium—but they have no bathrooms. Some are expensive, especially on the southern side of the Grand' Place, where the English stay during their brief pilgrimages. We sought and found a cheap and excellent hotel on the northern side, where a double bedroom was 15 francs (2*s*.) a night, and dinner 12 francs. We were charged 50 per cent. more for beer than were the Belgians, but as this was about ¾*d*. extra per half-pint bottle it did not worry us.

The hotel is kept by a Belgian ex-soldier, whose war-time pal is now the waiter. 'We are as two brothers,' explained the patron, after dinner. 'You are late, messieurs,' exclaimed the weary waiter at two in the morning, when we returned from the night clubs of this fashionable resort. 'We have many memories,' we explained. 'I understand,' he yawned. 'I, too, have my memories—of my bed and your late return last night in particular. But tell your English friends how good is our cooking, messieurs.'

Passchendaele Ridge

From here you may look down over the Salient, in silence as your mind goes back to those days, when Time seemed to

have gone out of the making of the world, and Fatigue, Boredom, Fear and Filth took its place in the human show. But Time, thank God, has removed the four years from this place —but not for all. Here are German graves of the pre-Third Ypres fighting, rotting wooden crosses in rows just under the crest of the ridge. All are broken off short, where the British machine guns swept almost ceaselessly in those November days when the men lay here in the watery craters. But life was kind to them, too, for it gave them escape through death.

Hill 60

Hill 60 is one of the show places of the Salient to-day. Every morning about a dozen peasants go there to dig. You see the 'souvenirs' they have dug up lying on sacks or lengths of cloth at the edge of the pits in which they are working. There are wooden pipes, both British and German shape, well preserved in the light sandy soil, fragments of rifles, bayonets, picklehaube eagle-badges, English county and London regimental badges, buttons, straps, bully-beef tins, pistols, bombs, revolvers, boots. Imagine an ant-hill, fifty yards across its base, thrown up a few dozen times by subterranean heavings, and dropping again after each mine-explosion more or less in the same place; always being pocked and repocked with shells; and now set with a small memorial to the 9th London Regiment, and dug over, and strolled over by 10,000 people every week.

All day long charabancs stop in the road opposite Hill 60, and tourists file past the melancholy little group of men and

children standing, collecting-box in hand, by the footpath entrance, and hoping to take half a franc off each visitor. By their sad faces they do not own the heap of earth, originally piled there when the railway cutting was made; yet by the occasional gleams of hate in those eyes we deduce that they have stood there with their box long enough to believe that they ought to own it.

Along the footpath the pitches of the souvenir-sellers begin. Prices range from 50 centimes (¾*d.*) for a brass button to 20 francs for a Smith and Wesson revolver.

About fifty Americans, wearing names of their home towns on bands round their hats, arrived when we were there. I 'witnessed' a minor tragedy in one family, consisting of a big stout father, a large mother, and a very thin son in leather jerkin, plus fours, horn spectacles, and white-and-brown shoes.

'Now what do you want with a gun? The darned thing may be loaded. See here, take a button.'

The small boy made a decisive cut-away gesture of non-acceptance with his right hand.

'Aw, pop, you said I could have a gun.'

The revolver they were looking at was almost a lump of iron ore again.

'The darned thing's dangerous, I say. It may go off and shoot us all up.'

'Oh, gee, you said I could have a gun.'

'Wal, take a baynit.'

'Nix on baynits. You said——'

'Will you take a button, or nuthin'?'

Again the neat cut-away of the hand.

They passed on to the large, irregular heap of fawn-coloured earth, the boy stifling back his disappointment.

The Salient Now—and Then

Flatness of green fields, no tall trees anywhere, clusters of red-tiled, red-bricked farms and houses, and a dim village-line on the far horizon, only very slightly higher, it seems, than the green flatness everywhere—that is the Salient to-day. Yet for years these few square miles were shapeless as the ingredients of a Christmas pudding while being stirred. Not even worms were left after the bombardments—all blasted to shreds, with the bricks of ruins, stumps of trees, and metalling of roads. We used to say it could never be reclaimed: that in fifty years it would be the same dreadful morass.

Mankind suffered over a million casualties within the dish, double-rimmed with inner and outer 'ridges', of the Salient. It had the outline of a skull, the teeth trying to crack Ypres—so the Germans, with grim humour, drew it during the War. A fit man can easily walk round the skull's outline in a day; but in '17, could he have walked without human interference, he would have dropped, exhausted, before he had floundered a hundredth part of the way, and been drowned with his face under the thin top mud. The bombardments broke the bekes, or brooks, draining this land, which was once covered by the sea; and the pudding became porridge, a-swim with icy water.

The only way over the morass was by the wooden tracks that serpentined over the mud— baulks of teak and beech laid side by side, looking like the slough, cast by monsters of the

primeval slime. Always at night the tracks glowed and glared with fire and smoke and dreadful crashes; sections would rise splintered into the air, waggons, horses, mules with them; the mud bordering the tracks was piled with old broken and swelled things. The young German gunner cadets were trained in night-firing on these tracks, which were visible along their ribbed and winding lengths by day. Now if you would recall 1917 to your memory, you must stay away from this fine agricultural district.

The Genius of the Salient

Near St. Julien, opposite Triangle Farm, at a place called Vancouver, stands the most beautiful thing in the Salient. People call it the Canadian Memorial, but for me it is the memorial for all the soldiers in the War. It faces towards Ypres, not towards a vanquished enemy, as do so many of the war memorials, to be seen in France to-day, such as the Gallic cock crowing triumphantly on a broken cannon at Roclincourt, or the caribou roaring eastwards from Beaumont Hamel, or the defiant artisan-soldier standing firm and fierce at Lens.

Do the dead feel cock-crowing triumph over the dead? The crowing is for the industrial magnates, the Lens or the Ruhr mine-owners, not for the poor unknowing working-men who fell in the Great Horror, and became part of it.

No; the colossal head and shoulders of the soldier with reversed arms emerging from the tall stone column has the gravity and strength of grief coming from full knowledge of old wrongs done to men by men. It mourns; but it mourns for all mankind. We are silent before it, as we are before the stone

figures of the Greeks. The thoughtless one-sided babble about national righteousness or wrongness, the clichés of jingo patriotism, the abstract virtues parasitic on the human spirit, fade before the colossal figure of the common soldier by the wayside.

The genius of Man rises out of the stone, and our tears fall before it.

Sixth Day

Sixth Day

We buy Cigars

To our dismay, on counting our money, we found that it was nearly gone. Whither had it gone? To be sure, there was the Extraordinary Adventure of the Barber of Ypres last night: our heads are shorn, our chins shaven, our moustaches like subdued eyebrows, our ears and nostrils plucked, and we have the dagger—but that adventure must be recounted at length elsewhere, if only it can recreate itself as it happened! Yet that accounts for about forty francs only, including the dagger. Then we have the cigars—a most excellent brand, that produces no gyratory effect on the sense of balance when smoked after a bottle and a half of Burgundy. At least, not until the body, in the language of the 'physical jerks' squad, 'assumes the prone position.' Anyhow (to continue in the 1914-1918 jargon), it simply wasn't done to leave Ypres without a binge; and so it happened that at about two o'clock in the morning we left the Singing Barber smoking one of the cigars mentioned above, and went back to our hotel.

The cigars had cost forty francs—for fifty. We had a box each: we intended to smoke them at home, on special occasions, when they would remind us of the happy past. (For the prevailing mood in easeful memory is one of retrospective

happiness, especially after a good bottle of wine. 'They were the days!' Of course, memory is a falsifier of actuality.) We had bought them on the advice of the Dry-Cleaned Man, who had told us that we could not be required to pay duty on them, as fifty were allowed duty-free into England.

We paid our bills, leaving 10 per cent. for the sleepy garçon, and, recalling the war-time prophetic jokes about souvenir sellers 'après la guerre finie', we walked along to the railway station. With a certain satisfaction we passed the modern Valhalla, with its 'dinning-room' of the free beer and pigeons, and its 'Gold Baths' for the soldats anglais retournés. The sombre smoking steam-tram was sizzling on the rails laid in the pavé: we climbed into the carriage, and carefully taking off our packs (lest the precious cigars be crushed) we prepared for a pleasant but slow ride to Messines via Kruisstraathoek, Vierstraat, Kemmel and Wytschaete.

The Rude Men

As for the last place, there is the Story of Rude Men of Wytschaete I could tell, but it does not belong to this tour with 'Four-toes', but to another visit; and it may not be worth ink and paper: nevertheless, since it made a deep impression, it shall be told. How, two years before, some young Belgians on Whit Sunday had accosted a tired English pilgrim and his young wife when they entered an estaminet near Maedelstede Farm; and how, while the strangers were waiting for coffee and bread and cheese, the young men had asked, in loud and leering voices, and with crude gestures, the meaning of certain

bawdy English words they had acquired from our men during the War, when they had been little boys running beside the railway line crying shrilly, 'Souvenir Bully Biff! Souvenir Ceegarette! Tommy, geef me Biskeet!' and other words and expressions (unprintable) which had appeared amusing to us in those days; and how, seeing the reddening-face of the young English girl-wife, they had addressed themselves to her with suggestions until the Englishman, usually gentle and pacific (it may be cowardly) by nature, who had been sitting with a quiet restrained face, suddenly sprang to his feet and pushed one over; and how, made desperate by the combined menacing attitude of the other three, he had picked up a chair and rammed them so that they crashed into the unlighted stove and the pipe had fallen into sooty sections about them; and how, a little excited at his success, he had caught one in a lucky clasp round the waist and thrown him into a corner, and two glasses of beer after him; and how, with his wife, he had left very quickly, slamming the door on their angry shouts, to see, to his relief, a steam-tram coming up the slight slope of the road from Kemmel. And how, on reaching the higher village of Messines, he had gone to an hotel by the church, and told his story to the patronne, and been informed that it was all one could expect in Wytschaete—a lowdown place, whose people were socially far beneath the inhabitants of Messines.

When next the traveller went into the estaminet, two years afterwards, he was recognized, and greeted with a noise as of frogs, made with the lips—and this is all I know of Wytschaete.

'Plugstreet'

In Messines, as elsewhere, the church has been rebuilt, and it is difficult to imagine the place as it was in June 1917, when the mines went up, and after the assault the place was scattered with more orange-peel than Hampstead Heath on August Bank Holiday.

'What's that stiffy got in 'is pockets, Bert? Oranges, or Bombs?'

'Bombs, I expect. What 'opes, when Rob All My Comrades[1] 'ave been in the neighbourhood?'

We walked through the old German lines on the way to Ploegsteert Wood, passing the hamlet of St. Yves, where we tried to find the site of the cottage, on the broken walls of which Second-Lieutenant Bairnsfather, the machine-gun officer of our neighbouring brigade in those 1914 days, drew the first 'fragment from France'. It was not to be discovered. We went through the wood itself, haunt of wildfowl, rabbits, hares and pheasants in those days, which the Colonel used to shoot with a borrowed 12-bore gun; and the batman of the Colonel with the same gun when the C.O. was away, followed by the same keeper (whom rumour later shot as a spy). The men of the 11th and 12th brigades prowled with their rifles near the trenched eastern end of the wood, where the Colonel and his Adjutant were never seen. There were cats, too, after the rabbits had gone; for weeks they prowled, lean and hoarse, around the ruins of the farms and cottages. Hens, too; I remember

[1] Soldiers' hospital experience of the R.A.M.C.

one stalking along the parapet of East Lancs Trench, one morning. It did not survive long, in its innocence.

Before the winter was over all the game in the wood was shot, and the Colonel was awarded the C.M.G., and he went home sick; and the Adjutant was awarded the D.S.O. soon afterwards, and he went on the Staff. The regiment saw them no more until the summer of 1927, when the Bishop who was our chaplain ('much to his regret he was not permitted to go overseas with the battalion' which had volunteered for active service as a battalion immediately after his Holy War appeal) assumed again his clerico-militant uniform with its rank-badges of a lieutenant-colonel, and at an impressive service at the cemetery—which had changed from a semi-wild flowering acre of ground set with grey wooden crosses beside a willow-fringed beke to a place of white headstones scrupulously aligned in a mown and level lawn and enclosed within stone walls—was blessed. The old cemetery, with its 1914 memories, was a place to linger in; but now, massoned and aligned and brought up to date—there is nothing.

To-day the wood is unrecognizable, the old redoubts and corduroy paths undiscoverable. The brasserie, where we bathed in the vats while the winter wind scoured through the slats upon our nakedness, is gone for ever, and the wood is filled with graves. Its spirit lives only in memory; with us it will die, so we walk on.

We go East; our Cigars go West

Not far from Ploegsteert, on the dusty road to Armentières, my hobbling friend and I crossed a narrow footbridge over a

dry ditch and were confronted by a blue notice-board which told us that we had crossed the frontier of Belgium and were in France. We continued, and were approaching the Lys canal where it moves under the bridge carrying the road when we noticed a barrier pole. A French gendarme lounged beside a small hut, smoking a cigar. We greeted him; he greeted us; and we were about to pass him when his lounging attitude became slightly less careless, and with a finger he beckoned to us. We returned, and he pointed to our packs, indicating with a jerk of his head and a cock of his cigar that he desired to see what we had to declare.

We said nothing, and opened our packs.

He shook our things on to the road, and picking up my box of cigars, opened it. Then he took the cigars of 'Four-toes', and to our amazement bade us what was remarkably like good evening.

We protested, and he led the way to an office on the other side of the road.

When he came out we learnt that the duty payable was 160 francs, which we must pay on the morrow at nine o'clock, as the office was then closed.

One hundred and sixty francs! Very well then, we would go back into Belgium.

That was permissible, certainement, but not with the cigars. We were on French soil.

After a short conference we asked him what cigars we were permitted to bring into la belle France without being required to pay duty. Three, we were told. And how many in process de fumification?

He shrugged his shoulders and cocked his cigar.

Eh bien, we said to each other (breaking into our most philosophical French), we would take three in our pocket, and smoke two each in our mouths. And so we proceeded into Armentières, which we reached in the failing light—a gaunt and sombre town, with buildings like prisons. We caught a train to Lille, thence to Arras, where we stayed the night. In the morning the feet of 'Four-toes' were bad again, and as he could hardly walk, and was 'fed-up', he returned to England.

Seventh Day

Seventh Day

Arras

We had avoided the expensive hotels on our arrival the evening before, and found a small place in a narrow side street near the station. By the appearance of the walls and ceiling of our attic room, it was a pre-War building; one of the few houses not razed by the German shelling. It was dingy, worn-looking, and dirty; but we drew the line, as we said to each other, at the stagnant relics of a previous occupation, which we hastened to suggest to the fat and truculent landlady in the bar downstairs—the ground floor was the haunt of blue-bloused railway porters crachant et fumant violently as they argued about the Ruhr occupation—should be removed toute de suite. She gave us a somewhat fearsome look, and we went elsewhere to have a meal.

Afterwards we went to a revue in a sort of small theatre. One of the items in the revue was an impassioned recitation about the bells of Rheims, and to our surprise the audience showed their agreement with the speaker by hissing and shouting out about the sacrés boches. It was surprising to us foreigners; their mentality remained as in the War years. But this surprise may merely reveal my superficial and narrow (anglicized) outlook: for undoubtedly this hatred was due to the deep

roots of fear, in the old French mentality, of the old German mentality.

Another awkward moment with madame in the morning as we paid our bill of 10 francs for the bedroom. Well, weren't we going to give her extra for all her trouble? Extra, madame? What exactly did she require? Perhaps if she would kindly tell us . . . She burst into a fury, and called the room of wine-drinkers to witness that the English were a lot of mean pigs, who had ousted them out of their own town in the War, and now doing the same in peace-time. Swiftly 'Four-toes' and I got out of it.

That I am too prejudiced by my personal reaction to my stay in Arras can be shown by the following entry in my note-book which I made half an hour later. I could comment on the folly of generalizing—the curse of mankind—now in tranquillity, but I won't.

Below Vimy Ridge, 28th May. Written during intervals of scratching

Arras is a dirty, pimply, spattered, pocked place; thank sun and rain that England is green, and a sea is around our island! The town I see below me, at the end of a long gentle level slope, one slightly less gradual than the slope of land from Passchendaele to Ypres, is a pock-marked, lurdan place, with inferior people still rancid in spirit with hate. Most have new houses much better than before the War, owing to excessive claims and rewards of reparation money. The farms are bigger, with tiled sheds brick-built, modern tractors and machinery replacing the ancient implements and mud-walled

barns roofed with thatch. Arras is a cess-pit where the scoriæ of the post-War period have slid from the eruption of War. War purifies, but purification leaves scoriæ! Oh, to see English faces again!

Dommage de guerre

Four times the pre-War value of the destroyed house. Architect and owner get into conference. The local Mayor endorses the claim. Hence buildings much superior to pre-War buildings. (Incidentally, good housing is anti-War.)

On the Heights of Vimy

When, after the capture of the Vimy Ridge in April 1917, Haig came to Arras in his Rolls-Royce with the tiny Union Jack fluttering on the radiator, he said to one of his staff officers, 'But where is the Vimy Ridge?'

If you toil up the long gradual slope, and continue over the crest, and stand on one of the cracked roofs of the concrete German gunshelters which still remain at the edge of Farbus Wood, you will have a view over hundreds of square miles of flat country. The smoke of industrial towns dissolves the far horizon. Nearer, on your left front, you will see the wide red sprawling blotch that is Lens; and if it is spring, with the winter wheat no taller than a lark's head, you will see where the trenches of the northern wing of the Hindenburg Line lay across the plain, with their crenellated communication trenches and star-shaped redoubts, revealed as blurred lines of whitish chalk-lumps levelled with the brown top-soil of the fields.

I went down into Vimy village, and had an omelette there,

and a bottle of sour red wine which was more an act of traveller's bravado than a refreshment. Afterwards I pottered about in a dream of memory, looking at old pill-boxes and touching strands of rusty barbed wire. In one grazing field, revealing its War history by the gentlest undulations, a bull was grazing beside a cow. They grazed so quietly and happily, nose by nose, less than a yard behind the wire fence at the edge of the sunken road. I stood and watched them as they cropped the young grass, their heads apart by less than a hand's span. I cannot explain it, but the sight of those gentle beasts filled me with a tranquil happiness all that afternoon and evening.

Eighth Day

Eighth Day

The Widow of Roclincourt

At Roclincourt, under Vimy Ridge, there is an estaminet worth 85,000 francs. I rested there for two tranquil nights and days. The owner is a widow woman, old and gentle and quiet. She looks after two English gardeners of the local cemetery, and has done so during four years. They have a gramophone, and English papers arrive regularly. Every night after supper they clasp and turn round and round together solemnly to the jazz of the gramophone.

The old woman and her little granddaughter look on, with perhaps a neighbour. She is a little, tidy, red-faced woman, with quick shuffling feet, and cleans her new 85,000 franc floors every day on her knees, with pail and swab. Her rooms have little furniture, and the one I slept in had only a chair and bed (fumed oak) and pail. She awaits dommage de guerre for furniture. That, too, no doubt, will be of fumed oak, très belle!

There is but one picture in her kitchen: the portrait, enlarged from a snapshot, of her only son, a young soldier who fell at Verdun. She tells you what a fine house she has, with electric light and central heating: such a splendid cooking range, porcelain and enamel faced, with a beautiful design of birds and flowers; but sometimes when she is speaking her

eyes cease to see these things, and her voice is silent, and she looks very tired. Then the voices of the English gardeners calling 'Ma' in the other room give her new life, and she shuffles in swiftly, with wine and food: and her eyes shine, and she smiles as she watches them, and when she returns to the kitchen she is proud again of her fine new house.

La Maison Blanche

Wandering around, I discovered the Canadian H.Q. dug-out, where the generals waited while the barrage fire rolled up to the crest of Vimy and turned the sleet into steam on the morning of that April day years ago. Now all is silent. A little French girl produces stumps of tallow candles and leads the visitor rapidly through one of the big new barns of La Maison Blanche, and across the farm-yard to three rusty sheets of corrugated iron laid on the ground. Underneath is the entrance. Steps, walls, roof are of brick—recently made, for tourists are many, and the dug-out is one of the sights of the battlefields.

Down many steps, and we reach the caves of chalk. The candle flames throw a bewildering glimmer in the cold, quiet place. Only the water-drops make a sound. Rum jars lie on the floor. Many tunnels here, and regimental crests engraved in the chalk—maple leaves predominate. The signatures and initials in indelible pencil might have been made yesterday. All drowned far under Time! Candle flames have smudged the chalk where many curious hands have held them. The grease thickens on one's fingers.

How warm it is outside again!

The Labyrinthe

During 1915 there was terrible fighting astride the Arras-Bethune road between the French and the Germans. The French, who attacked, perished in far greater numbers than the Germans. In those days the old problem, hitherto considered insoluble, was solved, at least in its human variation: the problem of an irresistible force striking an immovable object. The force was shocked into a fluid consciousness, and the object, being the same force, was shocked into an identical consciousness. The change of consciousness crystallized into *Le Feu*, by Henri Barbusse, a book which swept through the soluble thought of France in the following year (1916), as it swept through the soluble thought of Germany. The insular consciousness, secure and care-free through the ages (in comparison with the continental consciousness), did not accept this book as reality on a workaday basis—with the exception of a few with imagination, whose minds were not set in crystals of the old patterns.

Le Feu is the spirit of the infantry war in France, the letter and the spirit of reality; and it was shocked into an original crystallization in the neighbourhood of the Labyrinthe, a German redoubt in the chalk east of the Arras-Bethune road.

The Labyrinthe commanded the road; the ground sloped gently, almost imperceptibly, to the near eastern horizon. Behind that slight skyline was 'dead ground', where regiments could mass without being seen. Whereas from the ferro-concrete block-houses near the crest of the Labyrinthe—they lay, no higher than one of the many chalk parapets of the maze, under

the horizon—the ground held by the French was overlooked for a long way.

The Labyrinthe, with its machine-gun cupolas and deep dug-outs and belts of wire, its trench system like the web of a garden-spider, was one of the many tragedies of the French people; to-day it is a tragedy, for the old crystallization has—in the manner of crystals—striven against and overcome the new.

Elsewhere the white chalk thrown up by the bombardments has been partly ploughed in, or covered by grass: on the Labyrinthe it remains white, a wide expanse of chalk darkened when the sun shines with the shadows of crosses; but one does not notice the shadows. For, packed close together, and in pairs, back to back, the crosses that are planted in the bare chalk are a vast and terrible sight. Acres of crosses, acres of blackness, nearly 100,000 tall black symbols of crucifixion, each with a name and number and regiment stencilled on it in ragged letters of white paint. Sometimes a motor-car stops in the road outside, and some one—it may be a woman alone—walks steadily through the gate with an expressionless face, and pauses, as though hopelessly, before beginning a search in the immense silence of charred human hopes.

It is the German Concentration Graveyard, made by order of the French Government.

Black, black, black, vast and terrible, the charred forest sweeps over the horizon. In the waste ground adjoining is a concrete machine-gun shelter, burst open, with its iron rods rusty and clawing heaven. The grass is long and rank about it. Larks sing above in the free sky; the larks have always sung.

Black as charred thistles, pressed together, unloved, stark, the graves of the hated invaders! They burnt and laid waste, and now their bones lie in a burnt waste . . . but that is a facile thought of the old crystal-pattern of a competitive civilization: for the invaders were men taken away from their homes, men who must go where they are told, men who must believe that infamy is virtuous, and that God loves men to kill and crucify one another.

Even the light of the open day is sinister in this place: and the old agonies dim the noonday sun.

Neuville St. Vaast

Down the straight road again, and I came to La Targette, where the British and French cemeteries lie next to each other. How a spirit of loving-kindness hovers over the British cemetery! Flowers which you see in English gardens grow here—columbines, pansies, campanulas.

A book is to be found in the green box on the post, for the signatures and remarks of visitors. Many Scots, Canadians, and English folk have written their thoughts of the cemetery; the phrase 'nice and beautiful' recurs often. The simple stones, each carved with a badge and a name, are clean, and the lawns around them weeded and mown.

Beyond a hawthorn hedge is the French cemetery. White crosses, wide-spaced; this place also is tended, and flowers grow here. Gardeners are kneeling at work. Each cross bears the tricolour—blue, red, and white paint. The spirits of the slain may breathe here; or rather, the spirit of living finds a

wider, easier place for its hopes down here. Up there, in the Labyrinthe . . .

I walked on, turning through Neuville St. Vaast, and beyond, where the terrain is left wild and desolate, for a memorial. Many French died here in the early days, many more French than Germans; but all suffered to the very core of their beings, in that they were cold and sleepless and wanted to be home again.

I know. I was a soldier of the line.

The grass covers the old trenches and the small concrete shelters. Willows, those trees of the wilderness, wave on the ancient parapets, thrice the height of the howitzers which their parent-withies may have helped to camouflage. Reeds spring out of the old shell-holes stagnating with a brown scum, whence arises the ghastly croak of many frogs.

I passed heaps of rusty iron shards piled by the cart-track, with barbed wire, pressed like bales of satanic hay; and I came to a place where there was no grass, no young and happy trees, no old trenches, but only an uneven hollow in the stripped and naked earth. Men were working slowly in the enormous and rugged pit.

They had long hair, ragged clothes, and slanting eyes, with the listless, uncaring attitudes of prisoners. A man, apparently a foreman, was standing moodily on a hummock above them. I greeted him in my feeble French. He spread his hands as though dumb.

I examined a ten-foot pile of rusty shells, the duds of a great and tragic offensive, and picked one up. The foreman gave a hoarse cry and violently waved an arm. I was among Russian

labourers, of whose poorly paid existence in these places of desolation and old terror I had been told.

When the pile was large enough, a detonator would be thrust into the yellow-crusted cylinders and balls and canisters, and touched off with a time fuse: away the men would run, and crouch out of sight: and RUMBLE, . . . WOMP . . . They would have to dig another week to prepare the next excitement.

The Ploughman's Mite

Further on, past La Folie Farm, or its buried ruins, I found, by the headland of a cornfield, a single cross of poplar, made of a living stick pushed into the ground. The sere cross-piece was bound by a withy. Below was a legbone, a rib, a skull. A ploughman had done this act for some unknown German soldier left, perhaps, in the final retreat. Now the stick is a little tree, with many grey-green rustling leaves; the wilderness has blossomed.

If all had been as wide-minded as the ploughman in his field! Then the German people might have been given the ground where their dead lie, as a perpetual gift equal with that ground given for the English dead. It might have cost as much as one submarine: and the heart of the people would have been moved.

I sit in the long grass, and wonder, could it have been done? A gesture that might have meant, for the moment, personal loss for its maker; a gesture that had a precedent nearly two thousand years ago. A letter to the German people, saying that the French land was broken and many of the people had suffered (as all suffer in all Wars) and were still suffering grievously;

and that the German people must help to restore the dwelling-places to make the land fair as before. Such a letter would have been within the experience of all to feel and to understand, and it might have given another direction to the history of Europe.

Written in sunlit evening cornfields (from Diary)

Walked from Vimy to Croisilles, where I arrived at evening. Left my pack in the estaminet near the station (I am getting used to peace-time conditions now) and strolled up the sunken road to the high ground near Bullecourt. Remembered.

April and May, 1917, failure, and then failure, and then failure. Fifteen assaults in three weeks.

Trenches are filled in, but the dug-out shafts remain. Dry rot spreads its mock owl-plumage on the props. Deeper than Somme dug-outs. Where one has caved-in, the ground above is cracked and sagging. Take care, if you want to see England again! Concrete blockhouses every fifty yards. Trenches unseen from our lines, just over reverse slope of hill. No direct observation upon them from our line along the railway embankment. They see all that comes over the grassy skyline 100 yards away; their belt of wire is 50 yards deep, and waist high. No wonder our waves melted away in those early attempts! The sunken lanes lying before this outpost position (God knows how many lines the old Hun had behind that one, for we never reached it) were a death-trap, as the machine-guns from Bullecourt swept one end, and machine-guns from the crest, the other.

These blockhouses are not quite so solid as the Ypres pill-boxes; they are concrete, reinforced by iron rods nearly an inch

in thickness, like large hair pins laid side by side. Some were left as in the War, broken by shell-fire, bundles of rods clawing the air. Others have been demolished by men with heavy hammers and chisels.

Found the cartridge barrel of a Smith and Wesson revolver by one of the splayed slits—a steel foundation to the slit, two inches thick, and unbroken: but bits of shell had splashed it, like rain on dust. It had been covered, perhaps, by a steel cupola, for the arc of fire was 360° horizontally.

All the blockhouses had intercommunicating dug-outs underneath, reached by forty steep steps into the chalk.

Pretending ignorance, I asked an old man working in the corn—the type of old man who used to give a gruff shout when the 1914 troop trains passed him in the fields, and draw his finger across his throat, and then point to the east—what all the successive lines of squat concrete buildings might mean.

Slowly he drew himself upright, flung an arm in a gesture that included all the earth and the sky, and cried out in a great, gruff, slow voice that must have emptied his lungs,

La Ligne Indenboo-oor-r-r-k FINIE ! ! and bent again to the tilling of the field.

Last Day

Last Day

Disinterring the Dead at St. Leger

When the Germans decided to quit their ragged and perilous lines on the Somme in March, 1917, they blew up every cottage and cross-road, cut down every tree that occluded observation, removed the railway lines, etc., and walked back one Saturday night to the Hindenburg Line. At the time there was much talk at home about certain of their factories in use for the purpose of making further patriots of dead men. We soldiers in France scorned the horrid story; we knew it was a lie, for everywhere in the abandoned country, between the old battered Somme country and the new untried *Siegfried Stellung* were to be seen German cemeteries, set with wooden crosses and carefully-tended flowers. Some of our shells at Achiet-le-Grand had chanced to fall among the tombs, disclosing long leather boots, and grey tunics, and what they contained. There were many cemeteries behind their lines in the 'Blood Bath of the Somme', as the Germans called it. One at Ablaizanville had wrought-iron gates, and cream-coloured stones and monuments. It caused much wonder and respect in the khaki-clad passers-by. English wounded prisoners who had died in their field hospitals were laid among the German dead; equal care and thought had been given to friend and foe alike in death.

'Here rests in God an unknown English soldier'—the inscription was frequent.

I remember a solitary grave standing in the middle of a grassy valley in this country of rolling gentle downland; a grave that we came upon with a strange wonder and silence, set with a blade of a propeller for headstone, with pansies and mignonette and violets for coverlet, railed off from the cattle around the resting place of the 'brave, unknown English airman, who fell in battle, July 14, 1916'.

To-day, more than ten years afterwards, I stand and watch the German graves in one of those remembered places being dug up, and brown bones and scraps of rag being shovelled into boxes, roughly in the shape of coffins, but very narrow. The tall blond Flemish labourers pick up the fragments, and toss them in. What remains of the grey uniform cloth is as black and as brittle as old mushroom fragments dried by the sun.

An Englishman supervises with a French gendarme. The Englishman stands there to see that no English bones are taken in mistake, for in war-time friend and foe were often buried together. But not in peace-time—that time when the nations (or those minding the business of other people) practise war, and invent new ways of death. The bones of the slain may lie side-by-side at peace in war-time, but in peace-time they are religiously separated into nations again, each to its place: the British to the white gardens 'that are for ever England', and the others to—the Labyrinthe.

The German Graveyard Again

Black as thistles—the unwanted thistles that the farmer and his wife uproot through the long spring days. One sees them in the corn, with armfuls of docks, charlock, and thistles. The green and undulating cornfields, which reveal the past by the scatter of chalk in the brown loam, and sometimes a bone or a piece of iron, or a useless concrete building, low and square in the wheat. Black as a burned place, bitter and black as frost or fire, a frost of silence among the black crosses.

Once these were men who, having marched where they were ordered, and having done what they were commanded, after endurance and suffering, fell, and were lost.

'I want to go Home' (Soldiers' song)

Most of my money was gone. The average price of a bedroom was 10 francs; dinner was 12 francs; luncheon 6 to 8 francs. We ate in the cheapest buvettes; traveled 3rd class in the trains. Travelling was a joke, and the bare carriages, with their hard seats, part of the fun.

In the morning I set out for the Canal du Nord, meaning to walk to Havrincourt Wood ('Mossy face,' as the old R.F.C. used to call it, for it looked from the air like the ace of spades) and then turn south towards the famous Bellicourt tunnel. It was hot. My pilgrimage suddenly seemed futile. I thought of the sands of my North Devon home, and of my baby boy running naked from warm pool to warm pool, and splashing with

me in the glittering water. I gave up the idea of the Canal du Nord, and walked in the opposite direction.

To save time I took what I thought was a straight line across country to Achiet-le-Grand. I crossed over the railway embankment near Ecoust St. Main (in whose shattered 1917 remnants there was a water-tower, where a friend and I climbed to bathe one hot June day, in full view of the Hindenburg Line) and walked up the valley out of which the 18-pounder batteries (also in full view) used to throw their shells, with fuses glowing like cigarette ends, with a screaming *paa-aa-ang* over the heads of the transport limbers, rattling in the summer nights over the downland track to the dumping place by the cemetery. It is easy to recall those nights and days in my writing room now; it was almost impossible in the valley itself as I walked towards Mory and Ervillers. Suddenly I became irritated with the whole country.

Miraumont

The village was flooded when last I was here; the Germans had gone the night previously, and no guns were firing, for the enemy had walked out of range.

I remember the Bengal Lancers filing through the ruins: bearded, turban'd, dark-skinned soldiers, with the pennons on their upheld lances scarcely fluttering in the windless air. A battalion of the Yorkshire regiment was 'on fatigue', laying balks of timber over the liquid mud of the broken road. As I passed on my horse I saw a pallid hand sticking out between two balks, and a sodden grey uniform cuff; a young soldier laughingly put the handle of a broken spade between the stiff

fingers, saying, 'Now than, Jerry, get on wi' it; no bluudy skrimshankin' 'ere.'

I entered an estaminet near the station and asked for bread and cheese and wine. It was an untidy place like the village, a place of shapeless shacks and sheds made of rusty sheets of wartime corrugated sheet-iron among buildings partly rebuilt. There were several young men in the room watching two men playing a game of billiards. An idiot child was running about the room, and seeing me, but without human recognition, it came up and took my stick out of my hand. Its father, a man of about thirty-five years of age, in slovenly clothes, shouted something as he raised himself from a leaning position over the billiard table, and then resumed his preparation for a stroke. A female voice replied shrilly and rapidly from the unseen kitchen, and a moment later a woman ran out, seized the child by its wrist, wrenched the stick out of its fingers, returned it to me without a glance, and dragged the child through a door into the kitchen.

I waited five minutes, ten minutes, but no one took any notice of me; the game continued with much jabbering of voices, which is another way of saying that I understood only one word in fifty of the language of the country in which I was a foreigner.

At the end of a quarter of an hour madame came back, less untidy and less worried, and agreed to cook me an omelette.

I ate it in silence when it arrived; and I had just finished it when the game ended and the patron (I am ignorant of the right word; my authority for this term is a hazy boyish memory of the international works of the late Mr. William le

Queux) came to speak with me. I told him in my weak French that I was a returned soldier; I gave him a laboured account of the village as it had appeared in the winter of 1916-1917. He said that his wife had been there until November, 1916, when the English advanced up the valley from Beaumont Hamel; le pauvre petit—he indicated the idiot child—had been a baby of two years then, and had been struck in the head by a piece of English shell—c'est la guerre . . . The other men stopped talking, and listened; I explained that I was meditating a novel, or novels, of the War, the story of an insignificant and obscure family which had helped, in its small way, to prepare and make the Great War. I would of course, have to draw on some of my own experiences, as Henri Barbusse had in *Le Feu*—

Their eyes lit up; they exclaimed with enthusiasm at that name. That was reality, la verité! Only the week before a German soldier, looking for the grave of his brother, had come to the village, and it so chanced that he had read Barbusse, and had declared that it was true for the German soldier as well as for the French! He was a comrade, that Boche . . . no, boche was a bad word, part of the old world: pas vrai! He was a man like themselves, but in the War his uniform happened to be a different colour. He was a brother!

It was amazing, the animation on the faces of those men. Their eyes were lit by inner fire; they smiled eagerly, their gestures and attitudes were vital and happy. What had brought this miracle—to use a term of the old world? A stranger had come, a German; a stranger had come, an Englishman; after the mention of a name there was no reserve, no suspicion, no

distrust; all shared a common humanity. Something not supernatural, but supernational.

'Bonne chance, camarade! Bonne chance!'

I settled the very small bill, adding a few francs extra, and left gaily in the rain, and turned to see them watching me from the doorway. All of us waved together.

The Schwaben

The battlefield has been left in this place, and you may still see where many of the trenches were dug in the hillside slopes across the wide marsh. On the high ground above Thiepval wood, where thousands of our men perished on July 1st from the machine-guns of the Schwaben Redoubt, stands the Ulster Memorial Tower, like a giant hand severed at the wrist and upheld as a warning. The trenches—where for a few hours on that hot summer afternoon the men of the Ulster division rested and watched eastwards, until the enfilade fire from the north drove them back to their old trenches—are like old mole-runs, half-hidden by the long wild grasses of the years—Wretched Way, Lucky Way, Tea Trench, Coffee Trench, Rum Trench. These half-hidden seams in the hillside filled me with indescribable emotion—the haunting of ancient sunlight.

And Baillescourt Farm! Once there was a red ruin, dangerous with many dug-outs; now there is a mansion with many scores of windows, almost as big as Charing Cross Hotel. I hastened away.

I walked on the causeway across the marshy valley, with its charred poplar stumps wherein rusty splinters of shells and rifled bullets are still embedded. A barbed wire fence enclosed

the reeds and rushes of the marsh on both sides of the causeway; and I had climbed over, to seek the position of a German 5.9 howitzer battery which, bestrewn with empty wickerwork shell-cases, was broken and derelict there in the winter of 1916, when a voice cried out to me threateningly:

'Que voulez-vous la?'

I turned, and saw an elderly man with a grey moustache and ruddy face.

'Je suis soldat anglais retourné, m'sieu,' I explained.

'Eh bien, allez-vous-en!'

'Pardon, m'sieu.'

He growled in English as faulty as my French, 'This is not England!' and turning about, walked away.

'*Av-er-loy Wood*'

The nails in my boots bit the wet, grey road, once so muddy and shell-pocked, and grey clouds dragged across the sky. The rain drove across the undulating Somme country, and the Ulster Memorial Tower at Thiepval, on my left front beyond the marsh, was sometimes washed out by grey mist. I walked on, with head bowed to the remembered rain.

The young man of my old self used to walk along this road, which, save for toiling soldiers and horses and mules, lean with mud-rash, was lifeless. An alien waste place, with the dead still unburied in the shell-craters on either side. Now the wood is green, and the new growth is twelve feet high. The verdant waves rear against the black stumps of the trees which knew the lost generation that toiled along the road. The trees are

sapless and stark; only crows perch on them; the graves of the lost generation are near. In this pilgrimage there are loving thoughts for all things which suffered grievously.

A wind blew the rain away, sunlight swept down, and made whiter the hawthorn blossom. A cuckoo began to sing. Under the bank where the speedwell grew was a pile of shells, among them a tin-hat that in another year would be but flakes of rust, and a rotted machine gun belt. The trenches in the wood were fallen in, and a blackbird had made her nest on the hub of a smashed gun-limber. Through the sunlit spaces the humble-bees burred happily . . . once the bee-like burring in the wood made one sweat . . .

The note of a bird stole through the hazel wands and ash-poles, low and plaintive. Ah, yes, they were always faithful to Aveluy Wood, even when hope had left it. Next, three high and frail strokes of song, and then a pause. The nightingale was near me, hidden in a hawthorn. Suddenly the tree and the green air around the leaves seemed to shake with the liquid notes of its passion. I wondered if this bird had been reared during the calm summer days preceding the Somme battles in 1916, when the hazel stoles were still like those in Kent, and during the warm May nights the birds sang and sang.

The song of the nightingale is beautiful for itself; but its power of stirring the strange deeps of the human heart arises out of ancient sunlight. It is a symbol of all longing.

Sitting quietly in the wood, I remembered the cuckoo of those ancient, ancient days in Albert. Riding down the valley road of the Ancre in the summer of 1917 I saw a young cuckoo

perching on the wrist of a subaltern, who was temporarily attached to the Labour Corps for salvage work. He told me that he had found the young bird in a pipit's nest in an old gun emplacement, and had reared it. The cuckoo was quite tame. We cracked a bottle together, and talked as men do who meet in strange places, having the same interests. Was the bird caged? No, it was perfectly free. It slept in his billet in a semi-repaired house near the Cathedral. I suggested that it would leave him in August, when the migratory urge dominated all other feelings. He smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. By that time he would probably be back with his regiment. 'There was a war on . . .'

In the following year the billet where that officer had lived was shelled to hell in the great German drive which destroyed our Fifth Army. Peace came, and in the April of 1919 a cuckoo flew through the window of a new house in the village. Its hawk-like appearance frightened a child; it remained in the room, obviously tired, until it was knocked off the table by a stick and killed by the child's mother. Poor cuckoo! When I was told about it the following year, I remembered the fair and gentle boy at Albert in 1917, a 'crock' on light-duty, and wondered how he had fared. It may have been his cuckoo, for the house stood where his Nissen hut had been, and cuckoos do return to the woods and fields of their beginning. Where is its human friend now, I thought, as I rested in the glancing shadow of the hawthorn, listening to the liquid deeps of the nightingale's song. Stirred to tears by the spirit of ancient sunlight, I dreamed of him walking in other fields, where were no scars of shell-holes; and his cuckoo was with him.

The Valley of the Ancre

My comrades died in the cellars and rubble of this town, which was destroyed and made fetid by the German guns away over the hills enclosing the marshy valley. I arrived at the estaminet as twilight was closing the day of wind and rain —the grey battlefield rain that used to make one ear of a mule droop lower and lower; and when the other ear had drooped beside it, then the poor 'donk' was liable to sink down, to rise no more out of the knee-deep mud.

It was not pleasant, the new estaminet; the floor was of composition made to look like marble; the mirrors behind the bar had the tawdriness of new, factory-made things; the 'oak' panels of the chair-backs were of American pressed paper. However, here I would stay for the night, and leave the wraiths in the rain and darkness outside.

The large bar was lit by a petrol lamp, making more pale the faces of young men and women dancing to the blare of an automatic American hurdy-gurdy. On the door a notice was hung: 'Grand Anglais Jazz-Balle every Sunday Night wellcome.' Although the hot smoky air nearly choked me, my melancholy was slightly dispelled by that 'wellcome'.

It seemed to be a little tardy; but during a break in the demand for drinks some minutes later I managed to edge myself through the dancers to the landlord. My wet and bedraggled appearance caused a mild amusement among the crowd of youths.

The landlord was suspicious. Why did I walk in the rain without a coat? Hadn't I got a coat? Did I come from Bapaume,

where perhaps, I had been seeking work like so many others, in the brick-factory? What had I got in my pack? Had I money for a bed? I longed to curse him violently, as once a colonel, leading his battalion out of the line to 'rest' had cursed me when my horse bumped into him during the nightly transport congestion. (And I remember I put him under arrest; forthwith disappearing hastily and anonymously into the murk.)

I showed the landlord my money—the dirty, creased, tattered paper money of the district. It satisfied him, and he invited me to drink and dance.

There were Italian plasterers in the throng, who were earning, I learned, from 40 to 80 francs a day. While I was speaking to one from Fiume, a pale, thin French youth with long hair lurched up, flung down a 100-franc note, and yelled for drinks all round. Most of the men had rum, which cost half a franc a glass—about a penny in English money. I learned from the important whispers of the landlord's wife that the benefactor was the son of a millionaire, who had made his 'pile' since the war by buying for 'cash down' the sites of shattered buildings, and rebuilding with the generous reparation grants later on. His speculations were fortunate for himself; now he owned over fifty houses as well as the only two butchers' shops—a flourishing monopoly, buying old cows at 4 francs a kilo, and selling beef at 12-16 francs a kilo. He had three motor-cars, and his son was drunk nearly every night.

I could not enter into their fun; I was entirely a foreigner among the living, and half a foreigner to myself—a man who had lost part of himself, and was only now beginning to find it again. For years the lost part had lurked in the marsh, seeing

wraiths of men in grey with coal-scuttle helmets and big boots, wraiths of men in khaki, always laden and toiling, wraiths of depressed mules, sick with fatigue and mud-rash, walking in long files up to the field guns, wraiths of howitzers flashing away their shells with stupendous corkscrewing hisses upwards, wraiths of pallid flares making the night haggard, while bullets whined and fell with short hard splashes in the shadowy and gleaming swamps of the Ancre.

I could not sleep in my damp bed. The moonlight in the open window showed the dark patches on the ceiling under the leaking roof, the plastered walls, the floor-boards bare of carpet or any furniture. The dancers seemed to be walking about in the road all night; but at two o'clock the hurdy-gurdy ceased its blaring mechanical jazz; the last unsteady steps and confused voices went away down the brick-rubble road, and I heard the frogs in the swamp again.

Still I could not sleep. Was there a demoniacal influence in the marsh, materializing out of the harsh, ceaseless croaking among the stumps of the dead poplars? The perpetual and restless spirits of old cruelty and hate and despair wandering among the reedy shell-holes, among the crumbling wheels of sunken guns, and the brown wire in the long grass? The young green had grown again, hiding the old bitternesses, but the desolation was still there. Those frogs! Millions of muttering percussions as the cold-blooded creatures sent out their ghastly cries. No white gun-flashes lit the walls of the room, the trains from Lille to Amiens rolled noisily past the window; a star moved steadily across the curtain space, seeming to look into the room curiously, when it became very lonely there, and

glimpses of the past returned with unavailing sadness.

The dug-outs of Y ravine had subsided, the dry-rotted timbers broke with a touch; the pistons and mainshaft and cylinders of the aeroplane rusted in the grasses—I remembered the charred framework on the ridge above Station Road—with rifle barrels and holed helmets and burst minenwerfer cases. Those dreaded oil-drums of the minnies! Rust and mildew and long tangled grass and frogs. The Ancre flowed in its chalky bed, swift and cold as before, gathering its green duckweed into a heaving coat as of mail, and drowning the white flowers of water crows-foot. Only one thing of all our work remained—the wooden military bridge over Mill Causeway. 'Our work?' a voice seemed to say, a voice of the wan star. 'What you seek is lost for ever in ancient sunlight, which arises again as Truth.' The voice wandered thinner than memory, and was gone with the star under the horizon.

And So Farewell

When I awoke next morning the wraiths were fled; but the grey rain still drifted across the downs. What was to be found in the valley then? For we put into things what we feel, and if we feel nothing, then there is nothing. I was filled with longing for my home; to see again the lanes, the sea, the barns, the hills, the eyes of my wife, the smile of my little boy listening to the bells on the wind of heaven,—the new part of myself, overlaying the wraith of that lost for ever.

Ypres,
Roclincourt, Ham. 1927

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